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**EVOLUTION OF
MORALS IN THE EPICS**
(Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa)

EVOLUTION OF MORALS IN THE EPICS (MAHĀBHĀRATA and RĀMĀYAṆA)

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© Dhairyabala P. Vora

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To
MY PARENTS
and
PARENTS-IN-LAW

PREFACE

Unlike the vedic era, the Epic period has not attracted the scholars of Indian history and culture ; and yet the age of Epics, in the history of India, represents an era, to which can be traced the origin and evolution of the Hindu concept of morality. The book tries to throw more light on this particular aspect of the subject. The book is the author's thesis for the Ph.D., degree.

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Bombay

DHAIRYABALA P. VORA

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ABBREVIATIONS

Mbh.	Mahābhārata (Critical Edition)
A.B.O.R.I.	Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
J.A.O.S.	Journal of the American Oriental Society.
J.R.A.S.	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.
Bom. Ed.	Bombay Edition of the Mahābhārata.
S.B.E.	Sacred Books of the East Series.

INTRODUCTION

In the following pages an humble attempt is made to trace the evolution of moral concepts with reference to the data furnished by the two epics of India viz., the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa. Both the Epics are closely connected with the religious faith of millions of Hindus. They are the time honoured repositories of their legendary history and mythology of their ancient customs and observances as well as their most cherished gems of poetry.¹

Though in the Atharvaveda and the later part of the R̥gveda other religious traditions find some expression, the vedic literature as a whole predominantly records the religious traditions of the Indo-Aryans. The Epics on the other hand record the popular religious traditions which have been the perennial source of Hinduism. The significant difference between the vedic literature and the Epics is the fact, that social practices and institutions find casual expression in the *vedas*. They are the main items of the Epic as they are the life histories of the Epic heroes—the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas and the Ramayanic hero Rāma—the son of Daśaratha. Mahābhārata specially is, rather an encyclopedia of mythology, history and philosophy and delineates the social life more comprehensively. The Epic itself is conscious of the mission and proudly declares “What is here is everywhere and that which is not here cannot be found anywhere”. “The Mahābhārata reflects the multilateral character of Hinduism, its monotheism and polytheism, its spiritualism and materialism, its strictness and laxity, its priestcraft and anti-priestcraft, its hierarchical intolerance and freethinking philosophy combined.”² In view of its more secular, popular and human character the Mahābhārata has less of mythological or allegorical and more of historical probability in its narrative. “If the Mahābhārata teaches the lessons of life, the Rāmāyaṇa preaches the highest ideal of it.”³ Thus both the Epics are monuments presenting a most interesting picture of Hindu life and manners in ancient times and serve as the most

¹ Monier Williams, *Epic Poetry of India*, Introduction, pp. iii-iv.

² Monier Williams, *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ C. V. Vaidya, “Riddle of the Rāmāyaṇa”, p. 53.

suitable basis for a student of Hindu social history.

The Rāmāyaṇa as compared to the Mahābhārata is more or less a unified poem and "We cannot be far wrong in asserting that a great portion of the Rāmāyaṇa, if not the entire Rāmāyaṇa now before us must have been current in India as early as fifth century B.C."⁴ The Mahābhārata on the other hand which is in all probability later in date than the Rāmāyaṇa is in fact not a unified version. The tradition records three different versions of the Mahābhārata by three different authors, viz. Jaya by Vyāsa, Bhārata by Vaiśampāyana—Vyāsa's disciple and the Mahābhārata as reported by Sauti to the sages gathered at the Naimiṣāranya.

"There has been in India since the oldest time also historic songs which in course of centuries have been condensed into two great national Epics the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa."⁵ Thus there is no date for the Mahābhārata which would cover all its parts.

Hopkins puts forward the gap from fourth century B.C. to fourth century A.D. as the period of the development of the great Epic.⁶ In both the Epics there is a main story around which is collected a multitude of other stories. But in the Mahābhārata, the main narrative only acts as a slender thread to connect a vast mass of independent legends together, while in the Rāmāyaṇa the episodes though numerous never break the solid chain of the principal narrative. "Mahābhārata, therefore represents a whole literature rather than one single unified work and contains many and so multifarious things, that it makes it more suited than any other book to afford us an insight into the deepest depths of the soul of the Indian people."⁷ Many of the legends are vedic and are of great antiquity. There are also some of a more modern character. We therefore can trace the evolution of Hindu moral concepts through ages from a study of the epic legends.

The Dharmasūtras and the Manusmṛti are supposed to have been composed between five hundred B.C. and two hundred A.D. The two other Smṛtis those of Yājñavalkya and Nārada were composed before the end of the first century A.D. In a sense then, they are contemporary to the Mahābhārata. I have, therefore,

⁴ Monier Williams, *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Introduction, p. 42.

⁶ E. W. Hopkins, *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. I, p. 258.

⁷ M. Winternitz, *Ibid.*, p. 327.

tried to interpret the Epic tradition on the background of the vedic tradition on the one hand and the *smṛti* tradition on the other. These sources have thus been utilised to give a historical perspective to our data from the Epic.

"What differentiates human beings from the animals is the power of framing group values and applying them to the general rules of conduct. These rules are based on custom and custom is not merely a habit of action but a rule. It is not merely what an individual regularly does but what is regularly expected from him by the others and what he expects from them. It has thus from the outset an element of generality and impartiality; customs, moreover, are the products of social interaction and are handed on from generation to generation. In this way the dominating factor in human morality is social tradition rather than physical heredity."⁸ Among no other people appeal to traditions is stronger than amongst the Hindus;⁹ therefore the study of Hindu traditions is more important to the study of Hindu morals. These social traditions arise out of the interaction of various types of social relationships. The present work studies this social relationships by analysing the ethical traditions, firstly of the sex relations in the Epics and secondly of the social relations of the members of the Aryan community as reflected in the *varṇa* ethics. The evolution of ethical thought in the Epics is traced firstly, through the individual ethical development and secondly by analysing the various ethical concepts.

"The question with which a historian of morals is chiefly concerned is the change that has taken place in the moral standard and the moral type. By the first is understood the degrees which, in different ages recognised virtues have been enjoined and practised, and by the second is understood the relative importance that in different ages has been attached to different virtues."¹⁰ Thus besides the changes in the moral concepts, their relative importance during different periods is to be considered. The moral estimate of an act depends largely on the details connected with the act,

⁸ Morris Ginsberg, Introduction to L. T. Hobhouse's "Morals In Evolution", p. xiv.

⁹ Encyclopedia of Religion & Ethics, Vol. VI, p. 283. Also Cf. J. D. Mayne, Hindu Law and Usage, p. 4.

¹⁰ W. E. Lecky, History of European Morals, Preface, p. iii.

such as the external and internal conditions under which it was performed ; its consequences and its motives. "Morality and immorality are thus social conventions varying from zone to zone and age to age. . . Morality is only a means of social conservation the content of which must vary according to the changing circumstances, conditions and the particular organisation of the society which is to be conserved."¹¹ In view of this relative character of morality it is premature to call certain practices prevalent in a particular age or in a particular area as non-ethical. And it is so particularly in the case of sex-morality.

In spite of this ethical relativity of social traditions with respect to time and place there are some concepts which are of external values and of universal application. In fact, there lies the dividing line between morality and ethics.

"Although both are related to custom, there is a fairly well observed division of significance between them. Conduct, social in fact may be described as moral when it is maintained or even observed as a fact. But as conduct rises from fact to ideal it becomes ethical."¹² Thus it is of universal application and refers to constant elements in human nature. If the *varṇāśramadharmas* which are but of relative value guide the social and individual life of an ordinary Hindu, the ethical foundation of both the *varṇa* and the *āśramadharmas* lies in the *sādhāraṇadharma* which are to be followed by all individuals, irrespective of time and place. The enumerations of these *sādhāraṇadharma*s contain ethical concepts of universal application like truth, *ahimsā*, forbearance, charity etc. They form the groundwork of Hindu ethics. "As constituting their concrete moral life, it furnishes the positive basis of Hindu ethical concepts and norms."¹³

The second point to be considered in the study of morals of any society is the distinction between the moral concepts as advanced by the enlightened and cultured persons and the actual practices of the people. "The corruption of a nation is often reflected in the indulgent and selfish ethics of its teachers but it sometimes produces a reaction and impels the moralist to an asceticism which is the

¹¹ S. K. Maitra, *Ethics of the Hindus*, p. 302.

¹² *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* Vol. V, p. 602.

Also C. E. Westermarck, *Evolution of Moral Ideas*. Vol. II, p. 744.

¹³ S. K. Maitra, *Ibid.*, p. 7.

extreme opposite of the prevailing spirit of the society. The means which moral teachers possess of acting upon their fellows vary greatly in their nature and efficacy and the age of the highest moral teaching is often not that of highest general level of practice."¹⁴ It is particularly so in the cases of the Indian Epics. A discussion specially of *varṇa* ethics and sex ethics prohibiting relations outside wedlock would show how different the actual practice was from the set norms. Apart from that an analysis of the various virtues reveal a compromising attitude far below the standard of the actual ideal. What is important is the gap between the morals preached and the practices followed. The moral concepts are to be studied and evaluated in the light of the practices.

"Though rooted in the emotional side of our nature—the first moral judgements were not the private emotions of isolated individuals but emotions which were felt by society at large. Public indignation is the proto-type of moral disapproval and the public approval the proto-type of moral approbation. Now in every society the traditional notions as to what is good or bad, obligatory or indifferent are commonly accepted by the majority of people without further reflection. By tracing them to their source it will be found that not a few of these notions have their origin in sentimental things and antipathies, to which a scrutinizing and enlightened judge can attach little importance. While on the other hand he must account blamable many an act and omission, which public opinion out of thoughtlessness treats with indifference."¹⁵ If we take into consideration the fact that society exists only as a time sequence, its present always holding and containing its past, it will appear that a moral estimate often survives the cause from which it sprang. And no unprejudiced person can help changing his view if he be persuaded that they have no foundation in existing facts. If the society could be so convinced, the path of many social reforms would be made easy. On the other hand it would also provide to a curious mind a background which leads to the high ethical ideal preached by the two mighty sages of Hinduism, which have inspired prominent Indians like Tilak and Gandhiji who moulded Modern India.

¹⁴ W. E. Lecky, *Ibid.*, Preface, p. iii.

¹⁵ E. Westermarck, *Evolution of Moral Ideas*, Vol. I, p. 3.

CHAPTER I

PROMISCUITY

"The study of culture complexes of any society must invariably start with a study of marital union because it is the fundamental institution of human society, in as much as the circumstances and condition of such unions necessarily react on all the other sides of social organisations."¹ This observation on the institution of marriage, which regulates one of the most fundamental instincts of human beings, clearly brings out the importance of the study of sex-relations, for the proper understanding of any society.

It is often said that the human race must have originally lived in a state of promiscuity, wherein individual marriage did not exist, wherein all the men in a horde or tribe had access to all the women indiscriminately; and where the children born of such unions belonged to the community at large. This opinion is common to Machofen, McLennan, Morgan, Kohler,—Briffault and others. These scholars, as Westermarck² suggests, base their arguments mainly on data from two sources. Firstly, there are references in books by both ancient and modern writers, to people who are said to live or to have lived promiscuously. Secondly, there are certain customs which are taken as relics of an earlier stage of civilization when marriage did not exist.

McLennan observes: "Tradition is found everywhere pointing to a time when marriage was unknown, and to some legislator, to whom it owed its institution; among the Egyptians to Menes; the Chinese to Fohi; the Greeks to Cecrops; the Hindus to Śvetaketu."³ Briffault controverting the view of Westermarck that the institution of human marriage is rooted in sexual instinct and can be traced even to an animal society like that of the apes, insists that marriage in uncultured societies, far from being a means of satisfying the sexual instinct, is one of the chief restrictions which have

¹ K. M. Kapadia, *Hindu Kinship*, p. 47.

² E. Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, Volume 1, p. 103.

³ McLennan, *Studies in Ancient History*, p. 95.

become imposed upon their operation.⁴ Distinguishing marriage from other sex relations as "the establishment of a social and juridical relationship,"⁵ he points to the existence of pre-nuptial sex relations in almost all primitive societies as a definite indication of a general prevalence of promiscuity. "In all uncultured societies, where advanced retrospective claims have not become developed and females are not regularly betrothed or actually married before they have reached the age of puberty, girls and women who are not married are under no restrictions as to their sexual relations and are held to be entirely free to dispose of themselves as they please in that respect."⁶

Westermarck⁷ advances a long argument in opposition to this view and establishes that the origin of the institution of marriage is the primary biological instinct. He, likewise, gives detailed refutation of the arguments advanced by Briffault about pre-nuptial chastity and mother-right. According to him, among most of the primitive races, pre-nuptial sex relations are contracted, either due to a contact with the civilised race, or is more often a sexual connection between a boy and a girl as preliminary to their marriage.⁸ He concludes: "Even if there really are or have been people living in a state of promiscuity, which has never been proved and is exceedingly hard to believe, these people do not afford any evidence whatever for promiscuity having been the rule in primitive times."⁹

There is thus no unanimity as regards the general prevalence of promiscuity. With this general data in mind we may briefly examine ancient Indian data in regard to promiscuity.

The earliest written document of the Indian tradition is the *Rgveda*. It clearly reveals the presence of a regular institution of marriage; what is more, the fact that due sanctity was attached to

⁴ R. Briffault, *The Mothers*, Vol. 11, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷ E. Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, Vol. 1, Chaps. III-IX, pp. 23, 131-136, 124.

Also Cf.-E. Westermarck, *Three essays on Sex and Marriage*, Chapters. II & IV, pp. 220-225.

Also Cf.-W. G. Sumner & A. G. Keller, *Science of Society*, Vol. 111, p. 1549.

⁸ E. Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, Vol. 1, pp. 131-136.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

it becomes clear from the ceremonial ritual described in the hymn (X, 85) which to this day forms the nucleus of the Hindu marriage ceremony. In spite of this, there is some evidence that the standard of common sex-morality was not very high and references to irregular sexual relations can be found in the Vedic *Samhitās*.¹⁰ Yet these early *Samhitās* do not appear to be conversant with the view that at a remote period regular marriage was unknown and that the institution was gradually developed or introduced by way of a reform. Sarkar, taking his stand chiefly on the dialogue between Yama and Yamī, episode of Prajāpati's incest with his daughter as narrated in the *Brāhmaṇas* and some allegorical references in the *Vedas*, maintains that incestuous sex-relation between brother and sister, father and daughter as well as between mother and son were not uncommon in early times.¹¹ Dr. Mrs. Iravati Karve was also inclined to hold such a view, but she has revised her opinion in her latest book "*Kinship organisations*".

Epics, however, abound in information that is both detailed and definite. The *Mahābhārata* explicitly mentions an ancient tradition about the general prevalence of promiscuity in the remote past and lays it down that Śvetaketu—the son of Uddālaka, put a check on it, and established the institution of marriage. The whole legend is described by Pāṇḍu, the father of the Pāṇḍava heroes, to convince his wife Kuntī about the righteousness of the custom of *niyoga* which he wishes her to practise. He says: "O beautiful one, in ancient times, there were no restrictions on women. They were independent and cohabited with anybody at any time if they desired. At that time if the women discarded their husbands and behaved as they pleased, right from their unmarried state, it was not considered irreligious; that indeed was the *dharma*. This ancient *dharma* is still practised by the animals and birds who are free from sexual jealousy. This *dharma* visualised by the ancients, is respected by the sages and still prevails in the *Uttarakuru*."¹²

¹⁰ Vedic Index, Vol. 1, pp. 479-480.

¹¹ S. C. Sarkar, *Some Aspects of the Earliest Social History of India*, p. 74.

¹² *Mbh.*, XIII, 102, 25-26 (Bom. Ed.) describes the *Uttarakuru* country—as follows: "O best of the kings! . . . Where women are free to cohabit according to their choice and where men and women possess no sexual jealousy in that region I will take my elephant back". The *Rāmāyaṇa* (I, 91, 9) also mentions the *Uttarakuru* country as "A land of beautiful women of loose morals". It should be noted that these references to *Uttarakuru* country

This practice, favourable to woman, is the eternal *dharma*".¹³

Pāṇḍu here describes a state of sex-relations where no restrictions were observed. Not only were unmarried girls able to flirt with any man of their choice but married women too could discard their husbands for pleasure. This promiscuous state is aptly compared with the one prevailing in the animal kingdom. Another fact to be noticed is that this is not an imaginary picture but a real one, as it still persisted among some people, and still more important is the fact that Pāṇḍu calls it "*dharma*". He thus establishes that promiscuity was the normal rule; any convention opposed to it, an exception and perhaps against *dharma*.

Pāṇḍu then proceeds to explain to Kuntī how the practice of promiscuity was eradicated in other parts of the country. Śvetaketu—the son of Uddālaka—once saw his mother being taken away as if by force by a brahmin in the presence of his father. Śvetaketu became angry at this but his father explained to him: "Do not be angry, my son, because this is the ancient *dharma*. In this world, women of all *varṇas* are free as cows and other animals are."

But Śvetaketu could not tolerate this and established a restriction for human beings viz., "One woman can make love to one man only . . . If a woman is unfaithful to her husband, from to-day onwards, it will be a sin, equivalent to the killing of a foetus, bringing unhappiness to her. A similar sin would be incurred by a husband who transgresses a wife who is faithful to him and virgin at the time of marriage. But if a wife, appointed by her husband for the sake of progeny does not obey him, she also incurs the same sin."¹⁴ In spite of this restriction established by sage Śvetaketu, Pāṇḍu tells his wife soon after: "A woman should remain faithful to her husband during her menstruation (*rtu*). This is the *dharma* proclaimed by the knowers of *dharma*. While at other times the woman is free. This is an ancient *dharma*."¹⁵

This pattern of sex-ethics envisaged as the "ancient one" are not made with any censure or unbecoming comment. It is difficult to locate the country because of the mythology enveloping it. Yet the fact that this was a country with a different cultural pattern can be deduced from the frequent references to it, as a country of gods, country of superhuman people etc. right from the time of the Vedas where it is always differentiated, from other regions (cf. Vedic Index, Vol. 3, Page 84).

¹³ Mbh., I, 113, 3-7.

¹⁴ Mbh., I, 113, 8-19.

¹⁵ Mbh., I, 113, 25-26.

(*pūrātana*) is recommended by Pāṇḍu to his wife Kuntī who champions a different code of sex-ethics according to which a woman is expected to be faithful to her husband. She refuses to abide by Pāṇḍu's proposal that she should procreate sons from some other agency, saying: "I will not attach myself to any other person except you (Pāṇḍu-her husband) even mentally."¹⁶ She strengthens her stand by citing the exemplary behaviour of the chaste queen Bhadrā, who, due to the power of her chastity, was able to raise three sons by cohabiting with the corpse of her husband.¹⁷

The whole passage thus depicts the conflict between two viewpoints. Pāṇḍu is a representative of a code of ethics where sex is a matter of woman's choice. It is a pattern of sex-relation prevalent in some of the regions in the days of the author of the *Mahābhārata*. Can it be that it was also the ethics of the tribe to which Pāṇḍu belonged and as such upheld as *dharma* by him?¹⁸ Kuntī, on the other hand, is a representative of an entirely different code of sex ethics—one according to which a woman is supposed to remain faithful to her husband.

The same conflict of sex-ethics is propounded elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* again in the life of Kuntī, when god Sūrya once approached her for coitus in her maidenhood. While trying to convince her about the righteousness of a virgin's right to cohabit with a person of her choice, god Sūrya describes a state of promiscuity in which men and women were allowed to mix freely with each other and it was considered natural. What was unnatural was a check imposed upon such a behaviour. This check, says god Sūrya, is introduced by human beings and hence may be violated when found inconvenient. An unmarried girl is called '*kanyā*' from the root '*kan*', to desire, as everybody desired her. Therefore, she is always independent. He then tells Kuntī that in cohabiting with him she was not transgressing any *dharma*. "What transgression is there, if people behave according to their desire? All the females are free and so are the males. This is the normal course of the world; all others are unnatural barriers."¹⁹

¹⁶ Mbh., I, 112, 5.

¹⁷ Mbh., I, 112, 7-34.

¹⁸ K. M. Kapadia., *Marriage and Family in India*, pp. 56 and 62.

¹⁹ Mbh., III, 291, 12-16.

Here Sūrya first establishes pre-nuptial sexual liberty on the part of women as being normal sex-behaviour, and then proclaims the right of men and women, to behave as they like, restrictions on sex declared as unnatural. The tradition of promiscuity is not historically traced here as Pāṇḍu did; yet by referring to such a conduct as a normal behaviour, he, like Pāṇḍu, seeks to improve upon the mistaken notions of Kuntī about chastity. It clearly postulates that promiscuous society is more natural than one with restriction on sex-behaviour; as such promiscuity was '*dharma*' and regulation of sex-behaviour, '*adharmā*'.

The conflict between the new sex-ethics as expounded by Kuntī and the older one as voiced by Pāṇḍu and Sūrya is harmonised by the compiler of the Epic by showing Kuntī as submitting to the ideal of Pāṇḍu not because she was convinced that his was the righteous path, but as an ideal wife, it was her duty to do so. Pāṇḍu commands her: "So for my sake, O thou, with beautiful hair, you deserve to procure virtuous sons by resorting to *niyoga* with some brahmin, advanced in austerities. Through you, O beautiful one, I shall attain to the world reached by persons having a son."²⁰

Appointment of a brahmin advanced in austerities as an agency to procure children is a later development and Pāṇḍu's change over to this via media in place of his original contention for flirting with anybody, only suggests that the older sex relations were too dominant and obvious in the original narrative to be overlooked and as such are glossed over by introduction of another new ideal of *Pātivrata*.

It is to be noted here that Pāṇḍu shifts his position from an advocacy of free sexual-relation to a limited sex-relation outside the bounds of matrimony only for the purpose of procuring children. A shift from promiscuity to *niyoga* is very significant as indicative of the minimum limitations, according to the Epic writer, in the indulgence of sex.

These references to the existence of an earlier tradition of promiscuity, find support by its reputed prevalence in some regions according to the Epic. Uttarakuru country for one, and the land of the Madras for another.

In the great battle of the Kurukṣetra Karna retorts to Śalya,—the King of the Madra-deśa—who indulges in taunting him.

²⁰ Mbh., I, 113, 30.

"In your Madra deśa, and the country of the Bālḥikas²¹ ruled by you, women are shameless and know no bounds in sexual pleasure. Intoxicated with liquor, they dance in public, discarding their clothes; with no restraint over their sex-life, they indulge in it at their caprice. . . Nay (the Bālḥikas) know no shame and indulge at pleasure in the presence of everybody and with anybody, even with close relatives—with father, mother, son, mother-in-law, maternal uncle, daughter, grand sons and kindred, and also friends, guests as well as slaves."²² Not only that, Karna goes to the extent of denouncing that country as a dreg upon the earth—quoting Kalmāṣapāda who had described the Bālḥikas as the dreg of the world and the Madra women as the dreg of the females.²³

Salya only says and that is all that he can say—"O Karna! In all countries, there are good people as well as bad people. In all countries, there are *brahmins*, *ksatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* as well as good women, while there are also people who joke coarsely with each other, and cohabit shamelessly. . . In your own Āṅga country, people sell their wives and children. Remember the words of Bliṣma addressed to you while counting the brave warriors. "Everybody is clever at censuring others, while he is blind to his own faults."²⁴

²¹ It is to be noted that though the critical edition uses the word Bālḥika (Bactarians), the Bombay edition uses the words Vāhika (A Punjab clan), while describing the cultural traits of these people. In rewriting of foreign names, it is perfectly possible that later copyists should have incorporated a form current in their own day, rather than conserved a form no longer current, which it was easy to do, when not forbidden by metre. Again, that there was actual confusion between the forms Vāhika and Bālḥika, the former being a Punjab clan, the latter the Bactarians, it is not difficult to show. According to tradition, a drink especially beloved by the Bālḥikas is *sauvira* or *sauviraka*, said to be lauded in the Epic by degraded foreigners, but the foreigners here are not Bālḥikas but Vāhikas whose women sing, "I will give up my family rather than my beloved *sauviraka*". (VIII, 40, 39-40 Bom. ed). It is possible that the epic arose at almost the North West summit and in its South-Eastern journey—for it ends in being revised in the South-east—has transferred the attributes of one people to another, as it has transferred geographical statements and made seven sarasvatis out of seven rivers of antiquity. (IX, 38, 3 Bom. ed.).

Cf. E. W. Hopkins, *Great Epics of India*, p. 373.

²² Mbh., VIII, 27, 85 & VIII, 27, 75-76 resp.

²³ Mbh., VIII, 30, 68.

²⁴ Mbh., VIII, 30, 83-87.

The above account of the Madras as well as the Bāl̥hika country given by Karna, clearly reveals them as people of very loose sex morals, indulging in free sexual relation with anybody and everybody, even in incestuous intercourse within the family. Indeed the countries must have been so notorious for free sexual relations verging to incestuous intercourse within the family that Epic writer could not explain them away with the result that Śalya had to put forward such a lame excuse to defend his country.

As such, a sort of Matrilineal descent seems to be prevalent in these countries as Karna's remark further indicates.

"The women of the family thereof (Bāl̥hikas) will become harlots and the sister's son will inherit the property".²⁵ The Epic writer offers an explanation for this unusual practice amongst the Bāl̥hikas. "A chaste woman of the *Āratta* country was abducted by the *Dasyus* and, in their ignorance of *dharma*, was raped by them. She cursed them, saying: "Since you have approached me—a chaste maiden with kindreds without any scruples of *dharma*, women of your family will become harlots; nor will you, the lowest of men, be released from the blemish of this heinous sin".²⁶

The influence of Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇḍavas, over her sons is obvious throughout the Epic. She begets these sons through *niyoga* with the help of persons of her choice. It is she who protects them in the hostile atmosphere of Hastināpura, ruled by the cousin Kauravas. She prevails upon the advice of her eldest son Yudhiṣṭhira and sends Bhīma to fight a life and death battle with Bakāsura, the giant at the city of Ekacakrā. It is to keep their mother's word that the Pāṇḍavas contract a polyandrous marriage with Draupadī. Her message referring to the brave mother Vidulā, fires the Pāṇḍavas' enthusiasm and the great battle is fought. Not only that but in her secret meeting with Karna on the eve of the battle, she offers him the kingdom of Hastināpura and thus tries to save her sons from impending destruction. Even when the Pāṇḍava family is strictly patrilineal, in the life history of the Pāṇḍavas the influence of the mother is significant and sug-

²⁵ Mbh., VIII, 45, 13 (Bom. Ed.). The last line is omitted in the Critical edition. The Calcutta and the Bombay recension reads with slight variation.

²⁶ Mbh., VIII, 30, 58-59. (Bom. ed).

(cf. Critical edition, VIII, 30, foot note 392).

gestive. To add to it Kṛṣṇa plays an important part in the life of the Pāṇḍavas and is presented by the Epic writer as the relative of the Pāṇḍavas through Kuntī. Thus in the culture, of which the Pāṇḍavas are exponent, freedom in sex and matriline are associated.

It is not only in the case of the Pāṇḍavas but even in the marital relations that they contract we have glimpses of some traits of matrilineal culture. The residence in the cases of all—Hidimbā married by Bhīma and Ulūpi and Citrāṅgadā married by Arjuna—is matrilocal. All make first advance in their marriage and carry away their lovers to their residence. Ulūpi takes Arjuna to the nether world.²⁷ The sons begotten on all the three stay with their mothers. Both Hidimbā's son Ghatotkaca and Ulūpi's son Irāvān, are referred to as the sons of Bhīma and Arjuna and fight on the side of their fathers in the great war. Citrāṅgadā's son Babhruvāhana however does not appear in the war. The Mahābhārata writer has distinguished Babhruvāhana from Arjuna's other sons by saying that he was a *putrikāputra* i.e. son to his mother's father. In spite of this the compiler of the Epic argues that Babhruvāhana fought with Arjuna and wounded him, when Arjuna accompanied the horse let loose during the Aśvamedha as the latter instigated him to do so to test the bravery of his son.²⁸

A woman of the Madra country Mādri is bought in marriage by Pāṇḍu.²⁹ She stays with Pāṇḍu and children born of her are called Pāṇḍavas and not Mādreyas. Another princess of Madradeśa, Kaikeyi-marries Daśaratha of Ayodhyā, comes to her husband's house after marriage and her sons belong to their father. Unlike Mādri, she is known to wield a considerable influence over her husband in contrast to the other queens of Daśaratha.

The Madras and Bālhis thus have the grossest form of sex-relations associated with matrilineal descent. Karna mentions the countries of Sindhu and Sauvira as following the same pattern of culture and calls them as countries born out of sin and inhabited by Mlecchas. "Besides (countries) spoken of by me, the people

²⁷ Mbh., I, 206, 34.

²⁸ Mbh., XIV, 79, 80-81 (Bom. ed.).

While Bhīma's residence with his wife is to be inferred from the fact that Kuntī makes a condition with Hidimbā before marriage that Bhīma should return to his family at night. Cf. Mbh., I, 143, 17-18.

²⁹ Mbh., I, 105, 5.

learned in *dharma* know the countries of Sindhu and Sauvira as countries which are born of sin, whose residents are Mlecchas who are ignorant of *dharma*.”³⁰ One fact may be noted here that condemnation of all these outlandish countries comes from Karna.

If this was the sex-ethics, we meet with among the people of the North, similar traits are to a certain extent found also amongst the people of Mahiṣmatī a region near river Narmadā—the bordering line between North and South. During his conquests preceding the Rājasūya sacrifice, Sahadeva—the youngest of the Pāṇḍava—fought with king Nila of the city of Mahiṣmatī. But his army was tortured by Agni who helped the king. The Epic narrates a legend explaining as to why Agni helped the king. Once god Agni fell in love with the beautiful daughter of king Nila of Mahiṣmatī and from then onwards unless and until blown by the round red lips of the princess the household fire of the king’s

lace would not burn. Once Agni disguised as a brahmin presented himself before the king and asked for the Princess’ hand. As the king refused to comply with his request, Agni who was enraged, started burning everything. With bowed head the king asked for forgiveness and married his daughter to Agni who was very much pleased and granted the king a boon that his army would remain unconquered. He also gave a boon to the women of that country, that they could have sexual relation with any person of their choice without any blemish.³¹

Thus it seems that Mahiṣmatī was another region where freedom in sex life was tolerated. And this region unlike the regions described above was absolutely of Aryan tradition because the people are described as fire-worshippers. The fact that a legend is fabricated to explain the laxity of women as a result of a boon given by Agni, shows that the Epic compiler, who followed a different code of sex morality had to find an excuse for the particular pattern of behaviour like the above mentioned Madra and Bāl̥hika country where the pattern is explained away as due to a curse given by a

³⁰ Mbh., VIII, 27, 91.

Besides these countries there is a reference in the Sabhāparva of the Mahābhārata to the republic of the Utsava Śāketa. The term Utsava-Śāketa is explained by Nilkanṭha (Commentator of the Mahābhārata) as a republic inhabited by the seven tribes of the Utsavasāketas who had no fix laws of marriage and indulged in promiscuous intercourse (Cf. Mbh., II, 24, 15).

³¹ Mbh., II, 28, 24.

chaste woman. That the legend about Mahiṣmatī is a later fabrication is evident from the fact that when the same legend about Agni's love for King Nīla's daughter (here named as Sudarśanā) is referred to in the Anuśāsana Parva, no reference is made to the boon to women, granting them sexual freedom.³² In one legend thus, the laxity of women is said to be the result of a boon given by Agni, in another the boon is omitted. It is however doubtful whether the city of Mahiṣmatī had sexual freedom that we find in the Madra and the Bāl̥hika country.

Kinship through female is generally regarded as due to uncertain paternity resulting from polyandry, promiscuity or any kind of sexual freedom.³³ In Madras and the Bāl̥hika countries and in the tribe of the Pāṇḍavas also, occasional associations between Matri-local residence, matrilineal descent, mother's dominance, polyandry and even promiscuity are exemplified. It would not be too much to suppose that there was a wide area where freedom in sex-relations and matriliney were for long associated traits. The fact that the Epic writer exemplifying a different pattern of culture, could not drop them out from his work, shows the importance of these cultural areas during the period when the Epic went through different revisions.

Besides these instances of unrestricted sexual relations on the part of women, we meet with peoples in the Epics indulging in occasional revelries.³⁴ When the Yādava race, celebrated the festival of the mountain Raivataka, men and women intoxicated by liquor mixed freely. "King of the Vṛṣṇis—the powerful Ugrasena, also came there with thousands of women, and Gāndharvas sang before him. Again Sāmba and Pradyumna unvanquished in battles were enjoying there, clad in the finest garments and beautiful garlands and intoxicated by liquor. Akrūra, Sāraṇa, Gada, Babhru, Vidūratha, Nisātha, Cārudeṣṇa, Pṛthu, Vipṛthu, Satyaka, Sātyaki, Bhaṅgakāra, Mahārava, Hārdikya, Uddhava and many other Yādavas also came there with women and different

³² Mbh., XIII, 2,30-31. (Bom. Ed.)

³³ Melenan, *Studies in Ancient History*, p. 85.

cf. DeBloch, *Sexual life in our time*, p. 189.

³⁴ "Among the Aryas who inhabited the plains of the North, the spring or vasantā corresponding to the month of March and April was the season of love and pleasure." E. Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, Vol. 1, p. 88.

Gandharvas.”³⁵ It was in this festival that Arjuna saw Subhadra and fell in love with her. It is not improbable that youths and maidens took full advantage of such festivals to contract love-affairs. Another such revelry is described in the Ādiparva when Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa went for a picnic on the bank of the river Jamunā “Women with big hips; protruding breasts and beautiful eyes, with an intoxicated gait, also started enjoying as they liked.”³⁶

These instances where a great amount of sexual laxity prevailed and which could not be glossed over by the compiler of the Epic—the tradition being so strong—somewhat support the tradition of an earlier prevalence of promiscuity as advanced by Pāṇḍu and Sūrya, as already mentioned before. Altekar referring to some of these episodes mentioned, remarks: “There are a few passages in the Epic showing that a state of promiscuity may not have been an impossibility at an early period. They disclose an astounding laxity in sex morality.”³⁷ Sarkar and others have also made general statements of this kind. But they fail to observe that sex freedom was found amongst some of the outlandish people only. As for the midlandic Aryans, from the earliest times, they have a strict code of morality and that is why whenever any reference to the culture of these outlandish people is made, it is made in the most contemptuous terms.

In spite of the above conclusion we have to take into consideration the legend of Śvetaketu who was an Aryan sage. As Westermarck remarks about the legend: “Legends of this type can more be regarded as evidence of primitive promiscuity . . . At the same time I do not deny that they may be an echo of social conditions in the past. The story in the Mahābhārata may allude to the laxity of morals among the Non-Aryan people of India and the Himālayas.”³⁸

It is evident that Westermarck was wrong in believing so. As for the presumption that the story indicated “Minimum regulations

³⁵ Mbh., I, 211, 8-12.

³⁶ Mbh., I, 214, Footnote 20, 2101 (Critical edition)—Many such royal picnics can be further traced in the Epic and often mention is made about hunting expeditions or cattle branding expeditions of various kings, when women and prostitutes accompanied them.

³⁷ A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Culture*, p. 35.

³⁸ E. Westermarck, *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 106.

Cf. W. G. Sumner and A. G. Keller—“*The Science of Society*”, Vol. III, p. 1549.

or relative unregulation rather than of promiscuity;" it would be better to agree with Dr. Kapadia, according to whom, such stories may have been incorporated into the Epic to justify the practice of the brahmins serving as proxy to *Ksatriya* women. "They were thus purposely invented and added to the Epic at a later stage, as the exaggerated laxity verging to promiscuity pictured therein, was good enough to justify and make palatable a revolting privilege of the brahmins"³⁹.

In the light of the above discussion it may be said that though there is ample evidence of the existence of unregulated sex-relation amongst some of the people who were not necessarily non-aryan and though the tradition of that pattern of marital relations is perpetuated by the Epic-writer in the life history of Pāṇḍavas and the Yādavas who have become the symbols of reverence in the brahmanic culture, there is no conclusive evidence to show that any laxity verging on promiscuity was ever the trait of Indo-Aryan culture.

³⁹ K. M. Kapadia, *Hindu Kinship*, p. 52.

CHAPTER II

POLYANDRY

There is a school of thought which believes that polyandry was a feature of vedic culture. Dr. Sarkar bases his hypothesis firstly on the references in the Vedas to more than one god marrying a single wife (as for instance the Maruts and Rodasi and the twin Aśvinas marrying Sūryā) and secondly to the fact that an individual had a right to marry the widow of his elder brother, which according to him is a vestige of the earlier polyandry. Practice of using metonymics is its another relic. He further supports his thesis by drawing upon data from religious practices to a ritualistic detail recorded in the Taittiriya Samhitā (III, 5, 6) that the wife is there described as 'having noble husbands'. The Fertility ritual which includes her denuding and wetting in presence and with the help of the conductors of the sacrifice is a definite indication that the rite was originally performed by the joint husbands of a common wife.¹

Iravati Karve also agrees with the view of Prof. Sarkar. She supports her contention by an analysis of the kinship terms used in the Vedas. According to her, the word *devar* (younger brother of the husband) derived from the root "*div*", to play, signifies the relationship between the younger brother of the husband (*devr*) and the wife of the elder brother with whom he is on terms of playing and joking.² Upadhyaya is also of the same opinion for he suggests that *devar* was not only looked upon as a possible husband after the death or during the absence of his brother but what is even more important, as a second husband even during his brother's life-time.³ Polyandry thus seems to be a feature of ancient vedic

¹ S. C. Sarkar, *Some Aspects of the Earliest Social History of India*, pp. 79-82. Illustrations of polyandrous marriages from the vedic and later *Dharmaśāstra* literature are cited by Dr. P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. II, pp. 550.

² Iravati Karve, *Kinship usages and the Family Organisation*, A. B. O. R. I., XX, pp. 223-229.

³ B. S. Upadhyaya, *Women in the Rgveda*, p. 101.

culture and not a sporadic occurrence among certain aboriginal tribes.⁴

Briffault is also of the opinion that it was a typical Aryan trait and was in no way foreign to them. He adds: "It is a significant fact... that nowhere either in the Vedas or the Sūtras... is there a word of condemnation of the practice although on any view the Aryan must have been both before and after their arrival in India in the closest possible contact with populations among whom polyandry was an established social usage."⁵ He also mentions Jats or Rajputs of the Punjab who according to Sir Alfred Lyall are, distinctive of the primitive Aryan type as those amongst whom fraternal polyandry is a traditional usage.⁶

The eminent vedic scholars on the other hand are of the opinion that Polyandry is something foreign to the vedic culture. To quote Prof. Macdonell and Keith: "Polyandry is foreign to the Vedas, there is no passage containing any clear reference to such a custom. Even if Weber's view that the plural is here used 'Majestatis causa' is not accepted; Delbrück's explanation by mythology is probably right. In other passages the plural is only generic."⁷

Another explanation offered for reference to polyandry in the vedic literature is that polyandry being prevalent among the aboriginal tribes of India and the vedic Aryans being acquainted with it through their contact with these neighbours, whatever casual reference to this practice is traced in the vedic literature is more probably an expression of this familiarity.⁸ Of the two the former opinion appears to be more reasonable.

While the vedic evidence is of a debatable character, the

⁴ Iravati Karve, A.B.O.R.I. XX, p. 227.

⁵ R. Briffault, *The Mothers*, Vol. I, pp. 687-88.

⁶ R. Briffault, *The Mothers*, Vol. I, p. 677.

also cf. E. Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, Vol. III, p. 124. Similarly the family life of the Khasiyas of the Cis-Himalayan areas who according to Majumdar are purely of an Aryan origin should be considered as supporting the prevalence of polyandry in the vedic age for they live in a joint family, the brothers sharing the wife or wives in common. D. H. Majumdar, *The Culture Pattern of a Polyandrous Society*—as quoted by Iravati Karve, A.B.O.R.I., XX, p. 226.

⁷ Macdonell and Keith., *Vedic Index*, Vol. I, p. 479.

⁸ Henry Mayne, *Hindu Law*, p. 77.

J. Meyer, *Sexual Life in Ancient India*, Vol. I, 107.

Mahābhārata provides us with a concrete case of a polyandrous marriage in the marriage of Draupadī with the five Pāṇdavas. But the marriage does not receive the approbation of the Epic writer in as much as he has to give a number of explanations for what appears to be unnatural or irregular.

The topic of the marriage of Draupadī is first introduced by the Epic writer in the beginning of the Caitra-Ratha Parva of the Ādiparva.⁹ After killing the Rākṣasa Baka, the Pāṇdavas stayed with a certain brahmin at Ekeakrā. There a brahmin of strict vows once visited their host. Many stories about strange countries and peoples were recited by him and then he spoke of the forthcoming *svayamvara* of the daughter of the king Drupada. On hearing the wonderful account, the Pāṇdavas became restless. Understanding that her sons were eager to attend the *svayamvara* ceremony of the daughter of the Pāñcāla king, Kuṇṭī said; "If you all wish we may now move to the Pāñcāla country."¹⁰

But the very next chapter¹¹ gives a different version. It narrates how Vyāsa the divine sage came to Pāṇdava's abode in Ekeakrā and told them the story of Draupadī's life before her birth. He said: "There was a daughter of a sage, beautiful and virtuous but unable to find a husband due to her former actions (*pūrva-karma*). Through strict penance, she pleased Lord Śaṅkara. Lord Śaṅkara wished to grant her a boon. "I desire a husband who is virtuous," was the boon asked for again and again and so the Lord said "O auspicious one, because you asked of the boon of a husband five times, you will get five husbands in your next birth." That girl is reborn as Drupada's daughter Kṛṣṇā and she is destined to be your wife. So, O you strong ones, go to the city of Pāñcāla."

Thus while in the first account the visiting brahmin narrates the legend about the mysterious birth of Draupadī and her brother as a "strange tale" and reports her forthcoming marriage, a news which excites the imagination of the Pāṇdavas, the second account which introduces Vyāsa on the scene is deliberately narrated to induce the Pāṇdavas to visit the Pāñcāla country as suitors of Kṛṣṇā's hand and whose marriage with them was almost pre-

⁹ Mbh., I, 153.

¹⁰ Mbh., I, 156, 11.

¹¹ Mbh., I, 157.

ordained. Winternitz¹² rightly considers the whole episode of Vyāsa's introduction a later interpolation, to explain away the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī, by conferring upon it the divine sanction firstly in the person of sage Vyāsa and secondly in the boon conferred by Lord Śaṅkara.

A third reference to the forthcoming marriage of Draupadī is to be had in I, 175 where it is narrated how a travelling band of the brahmins advise the Pāṇḍavas who are on their way to Pāñcāla to join them as they also are going there. "You are handsome like gods so it is possible that by chance Draupadī may select one of you. This brother of yours, who is refulgent, handsome and of long arms, may obtain victory and much wealth there."¹³ Here it should be noted that though a hint is given about the forthcoming marriage—it is only with one of the brothers and no reference to polyandry is made at all. It looks quite natural that the Pāṇḍavas should have met a travelling band of the brahmins who were proceeding towards the Pāñcāla country with a hope of getting profuse gifts on the occasion of the marriage. Thus while the first and the third account confirms the first one, it further testifies our interpretation that Vyāsa's episode is late and superfluous.

The actual description of the *svayṁvara* starts with I, 176, 11, wherein after the failure of all the Kṣatriyas, Arjuna disguised as a brahmin wins the princess. The Pāṇḍavas went with her to their hut in sheer joy called out for their mother to see the wonderful alms (*bhikṣā*) they had brought that day. Their mother who was inside the hut without even giving a look to what was described as *bhikṣā* told them to divide it in equal portions and enjoy it. But realisation as to what she has ordered came soon enough and she was shocked; "I have indeed spoken what should not be spoken."¹⁴

Realising her mistake Kuntī went to Yudhiṣṭhira—her eldest son proficient in *dharma*—and asked him to find out such a way that her words may remain true while the *dharma* of the daughter of the Pāñcāla king may not be violated by an action which had never been practised (*viz.* the sharing equally by brothers of the conjugal right with regard to one woman).¹⁵ Kuntī's request clearly indi-

¹² M. Winternitz, "Notes on Mahābhārata," J.R.A.S. 1897.

¹³ Mbh., I, 175, 18-19.

¹⁴ Mbh., I, 182, 2.

¹⁵ Mbh., I, 182, 4-5.

cates that she also considers the idea of sharing a common wife by the brothers an "*adharmā*" indicating an absence of such a tradition.

Yudhiṣṭhira acting as if he had not heard Kuntī's speech turns to Arjuna and asks him to get married to Kṛṣṇā because she was his prize. But Arjuna is reluctant to get married prior to his elder brother and to act sinfully according to the belief of those days.¹⁶

Having noticed that all his brothers were of an age when they would like to get married, and that the beauty of the princess was such as made each brother desirous of her for himself and remembering what Vyāsa had told them about Draupadī, Yudhiṣṭhira, afraid of creating a dissension amongst the brothers declared, "This auspicious Draupadī will be a wife to us all."¹⁷

This passage perhaps betrays the true reason of the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī. It was Yudhiṣṭhira's fear of dissension amongst the five brothers. Thus this polyandrous marriage was a result of the diplomacy on the part of Yudhiṣṭhira, his idea being that possession of a common wife alone would maintain their family a consolidated one.

Since Arjuna had fulfilled the condition of the test put at *svayamvara*, Drupada, who now proposed the formal marriage naturally pointed him out as a bridegroom just as Yudhiṣṭhira had done before—it being the natural and normal course. But Yudhiṣṭhira expressed the desire to get married with Draupadī. Drupada agreed to this readily as it was also a custom to win a girl in *svayamvara* for someone else. He hardly thought that something else was proposed.

But Yudhiṣṭhira puts forth the proposal of all the five brothers marrying Draupadī, giving as reason—their mother's order, further adding that it was their pact that a jewel should be divided equally among all and he did not wish to break it.¹⁸

Drupada was shocked to hear this proposal which according to him was both against the popular custom as well as the Vedas and said that such an action would be an *adharmā*. He also

¹⁶ Mbh., XIII, 44; XIII, 90, 9. Bom. Ed. (It shows that right of primogeniture of the elder brother was a strong prevalent custom.)

¹⁷ Mbh., I, 182, 11-15.

¹⁸ Mbh., I, 187, 22-24.

reproached Yudhiṣṭhira saying that he should not even think that way. "A man could marry more than one wife but not so a woman."¹⁹

But Yudhiṣṭhira claimed that it was neither *adharma* nor against custom. Indeed it was a *dharma* and in doing so, they would be but following the footsteps of their ancestors.²⁰ Here it has to be noted that Yudhiṣṭhira, though he emphatically proclaimed his decision as not being opposed to *dharma*, did not offer any reason for the decision except rather the loose one that it was a tradition followed by their ancestors. It should be noted too that Kuntī had already declared the whole situation as 'one unheard of'. That, it was an exclusive family tradition is thus belied by Kuntī's own words.

The next chapter introduces us to Drupada asking Vyāsa, on a court visit, to solve this knotty problem. He asks him, "How can one woman be the wife of many? Would it not lead to a *Samkara* (mixed progeny)"?

Vyāsa puts it thus: "This proposition is of course against the popular tradition as well as the vedic tradition, because it is nowhere seen in this world, that one woman may belong to many husbands. Yet I would like to listen to different opinions about it. Drupada's objection to it was that one woman could not marry many men at a time because such an action was neither supported by popular nor by the vedic tradition. His son—Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna further added that it was improper for an elder brother to approach the wife of a younger brother.

Kuntī and Yudhiṣṭhira however argued differently. The latter declared that there did exist an ancient tradition according to which one woman could marry many husbands; firstly that of a brahmin woman named Jaṭilā who had married seven husbands simultaneously and a woman named Vākṣī—daughter of a sage—who had married several brothers known as Pracetas. His other argument was that he did not want to disobey his mother, who was the best amongst the elders and whose opinion was always as good as *dharma*. Kuntī supported Yudhiṣṭhira on the plea that a way should be found out by which her words may not prove false. Vyāsa then declared his judgment saying "O King of the Pāṇcālas,

¹⁹ Mbh., I, 187, 26-27.

²⁰ Mbh., I, 187, 28.

what Yudhiṣṭhira says is *dharma*, there is no doubt about it. But as to how it is *dharma* and is in line with the scriptures that cannot be openly disclosed. You alone are to know it." Saying so, he departed with Drupada to another room.

The chapter that follows, indicates Vyāsa's explanation so confidentially given. This explanation is neither based upon scriptures nor on any tradition. He narrated the legend of the five Upendras who were cursed by Lord Śiva for insulting him; and who were reborn as the five Pāṇḍavas and also their royal glory (Śrī) who was born as Draupadī in the next birth. He presented Drupada with a divine sight, whereby he saw them in their original forms. And so Drupada, on seeing all this, was fully convinced that there was nothing objectionable in bestowing Draupadī on the five brothers.²¹ To convince him further Vyāsa repeated the story of the penance of the brahmin girl again.

Drupada now agreed to the proposal, saying: "Be it *dharma* or *adharma*, if Lord Śaṅkara has so desired, let it be so. I am not at a fault, because Kṛṣṇā is meant for all of them."²² Here it has to be noted that Vyāsa is not able to convince Drupada by any solid arguments. He takes recourse to mystification and Drupada's remark also clearly conveys that he is not fully convinced. Draupadī is then married every day to one brother in order of age regaining her virginity every day.

It is thus clearly seen that Vyāsa satisfied Drupada only by miracle and tale-telling.

One more incident should be narrated here before concluding the analysis of the polyandry of Draupadī. When later the five Pāṇḍavas settled in Indraprastha with their common wife, Nārada came to pay a visit to them. He warned them that all the five brothers could not stay with one woman peacefully. To illustrate his statement he narrated the story of the two mighty *rākṣasa* brothers Sunda and Upasunda who fell out with each other and killed each other for the sake of a woman. And so according to Nārada's advice the Pāṇḍavas made a rule that Draupadī should stay in turn with all the brothers. When she was in privacy with one of the brothers, any other who approached there, should go to the forest for twelve years. And later on Arjuna who broke this

²¹ Mbh., I, 189.

²² Mbh., I, 190, 4.

rule had to go to the forest for twelve years.²³

This is a point specially to be noted. In any polyandrous society existing in this time no such arrangement between the brothers is generally recorded. In the absence of the elder brother the right of cohabitation usually belongs to all the brothers. Otherwise the wife always belongs rightfully to the elder brother.²⁴

To resume, a close scrutiny of the above data shows that Polyandry is something foreign and unheard of in the Epic except in the case of the Pāṇḍavas. Even in that case the opposition is very strong. Yudhiṣṭhira and Kuntī, both championing the cause of polyandry are at first shocked by the situation themselves. When Kuntī learns that the *bhikṣā* which her sons had brought is indivisible, she is sorry for what she had spoken, and consults Yudhiṣṭhira for finding a way out of it. Yudhiṣṭhira also at first proposes that Arjuna should get married to Draupadī because she was Arjuna's prize. It is only after Arjuna refuses to do so on the plea that he cannot marry before his elder brother, and that Yudhiṣṭhira reads in the eyes of all his brothers the desire to marry the beautiful princess, that the idea of a polyandrous marriage springs up in his mind. In end polyandry is upheld as an ancient custom of the family and in compliance with his mother's words which makes it *dharma* (right and proper) he forces the unwilling Drupada and his son Dhṛṣṭadyumna to accept it.

The introduction of Vyāsa in the matter is very strange and un-understandable. It was by his advice that the Pāṇḍavas went to the *svayamvara*. The whole passage seems a later interpolation—being absolutely superfluous there—thus seems certain. Again when he later appears in Drupada's court, he acts as if he is ignorant of what has happened before, and that it was at his suggestion that the Pāṇḍavas had come there and tries to estimate the situation anew. Not only that but he shows surprise at the suggestion of the polyandrous marriage though it was his own suggestion. The whole situation can be explained only if the

²³ Mbh., I, 204, 28. (It is possible that the whole of the passage is a fabrication to explain the twelve-year wandering of Arjuna which according to Hopkins is a collection of the heroic feasts of Arjuna brought together and explained as having been performed during his twelve-year wandering. E. W. Hopkins, Great Epics of India, p. 12.)

²⁴ E. Westermarck, History of Human Marriage, Vol. III, p. 194.

whole passage in which Vyāsa advises the Pāṇdavas to attend the *svayamvara* is taken as an interpolation. Again his behaviour in Drupada's court is most unconvincing and so are his stories told to Drupada to obtain approval for Draupadī's polyandrous marriage.²⁵

Yudhiṣṭhira's own arguments to convince Drupada are most unconvincing and it is very surprising that a personality like Vyāsa, renowned for his learning, is expected to be convinced by it. Even Vyāsa does not accept it as a tradition and tries to bring about the desired polyandrous marriage by resorting to mystification. The illustrations of the polyandrous marriage given by Yudhiṣṭhira are more exceptions than indicative of current custom.

We may now examine the attitude of the Epic itself towards the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī. Though the Epic accepts the polyandrous marriage as a fact, all references to it are made with reluctance. The Ādiparva refers to the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī as inhuman.²⁶ So does Karṇa in Sabhāparva²⁷ where he refers to Draupadī as a harlot serving five men at a time. Had the custom been a common one Karṇa would not have remarked derogatively.

Thus the fact that Draupadī's marriage is the only instance of the polyandrous marriage that we come across in the Epic, itself establishes that it is rather an exception than a rule. Polyandry as an institution is absolutely out-dated in the Epic and not only that but even the very idea of polyandry is shocking and revolting to the Epic society at any rate by the time of its final compilation.

Winternitz, on the other hand, explains away this particular polyandrous marriage as a custom strictly limited to a certain family tradition, Yudhiṣṭhira belonging to a family with such a tradition—

²⁵ M. Winternitz, J. R. A. S., 1897—Notes on the Mbh. After entering into a lengthy argument to contradict the statement made by Prof. Dahlmann that the polyandric marriage of Draupadī was only invented in order to illustrate symbolically the indivisibility of the common property belonging to the joint family Winternitz establishes; after a comparison of the story of the five Upendras in the Epic with those of the Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa and others and also with references to the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī in Jain and Buddhist literature—that the legend of the five Upendras narrated to explain Draupadī's marriage is nothing but a sectarian interpolation and is the story of the Brahmin girl.

²⁶ Mbh., I, 2, 88.

²⁷ Mbh., II, 68, 35, (Bom. Ed.)

and supports his conclusion by Yudhiṣṭhira's own arguments which refers to it as their old family tradition. The polyandric tradition of the Pāṇḍavas which seems to be a relic of a tradition of remote past,²⁸ according to Winternitz, seems to be too well known and late an instance to be successfully ignored. And in spite of the efforts of the Epic—at time of the final compilation of which the tradition must not only have been outdated but also repugnant to the society due to the newer concepts about sex morality—it has to accept it and retain it. It is very probable that the original Epic had accepted the polyandry of Draupadī without any apologetic comment.²⁹

Equally vehement opposition to polyandry is to be found in Rāmāyaṇa. Briffault makes of the marriage of Rāma and his brothers with Sītā and her sisters as a possible instance of a polyandrous group marriage. His argument is based on a comment made by a Rākṣasa Virādha. This Rākṣasa intended to carry away Sītā during the earlier part of Rāma's banishment. On seeing the two brothers accompanied by only one woman in a forest Virādha remarks, "Alas, what use is your ascetic attire? You both stay with one woman. Who are you two—who commit such an *adharma* giving a bad name to the ṛṣis in general". Briffault further attempts to support his argument by a reference to Janaka's speech on the occasion of Sītā's marriage: "O best of the sages by your command I shall now bestow both my daughters Sītā and Urmilā to your family;"³⁰ The marriage of four brothers of Rāma with the four sisters of Janaka family is considered an instance of group marriage by Briffault.

But Briffault is radically mistaken. He does not take other most essential and important references into consideration. For the separate marriage of each brother with each sister is unequivocally mentioned in the Rāmāyaṇa. Thus, after declaring that he will bestow his two daughters to the members of the family of Daśaratha and thus unite the two families, Janaka declares: "I bestow this Sītā won by bravery and refulgent like a goddess to Rāmacandra; and Urmilā to Lakṣmaṇa. O best of the sages, I declare it for

²⁸ It is a well accepted fact now that some part of the epics are even Pre-Vedic.

²⁹ E. W. Hopkins, *Great Epics of India*, p. 376

³⁰ R. Briffault, *The Mothers*, Vol. 1. p. 682 & foot note 1, p. 683.

the third time to make it definite that I bestow Sītā upon Rāma-candra and Urmilā upon Lakṣmaṇa."³¹ And this, his speech occurs in the verses that immediately follow those verses on which Briffault relies. Similarly the two daughters of Kuśadhvaja are separately bestowed upon Bharata and Śatrughna.³² Their marriage ceremonies—and it should be particularly observed, the bestowal of daughters by their respective fathers (*kanyādāna*) as also the acceptance of the hand of the bride (*pāṇi-grahaṇa*) are performed individually in each case.³³

This proves our contention that this marriage cannot be considered an instance of group marriage. The remark of the Rākṣasa referred to above incidentally reflecting the attitude of the Epic composer towards Polyandry—is simply a misjudgment on his part, which as a custom is repugnant even to a Rākṣasa.

A reference may be made here to an episode related in Mahābhārata³⁴ describing the birth of the sage Dīrghatamas. Sage Utathya had a wife Mamatā who was pregnant by him. Once Utathya's younger brother Bṛhaspati approached his elder brother's wife with a desire for sexual intercourse. Mamatā said to him, 'Please do not approach me, at this time, O Bṛhaspati I am already holding the seed of your elder brother Utathya in my womb, and it is studying the six vedas there. Your seed is powerful and I shall not be able to hold two seeds at a time.' But Bṛhaspati restless with desire, was unable to control his passion. He started the sexual act with Mamatā. The foetus in the womb however recorded its protest against this behaviour of Bṛhaspati saying, "O father (*tāta*), there is no possibility of two, staying here. Your seed is powerful and I am here from the beginning." So saying he blocked the way of the uterus by his foot. As a result, the powerful seed of Bṛhaspati trickled down to the ground. Bṛhaspati was very angry at this and cursed the foetus that it will stay in perpetual darkness. Accordingly, the child was born blind and was known as Dīrghatamas. Mamatā's answer to Bṛhaspati is worth noting. She refuses him, but it is not on the ground of *dharma* or that of any other sex taboo. She refuses him only for physical reasons,

³¹ Rāmāyaṇa, II, 71, 20-22.

³² Rāmāyaṇa, II, 72, 11.

³³ Rāmāyaṇa, II, 73, 29.

³⁴ Mbh., I, 98.

namely of pregnancy and of the impossibility of holding more than one foetus. This clearly indicates that there were no scruples, nothing wrong for an apparently married woman to be approached by her husband's younger brother.³⁵

Here the right of the younger brother to hold sexual relations with the wife of his elder brother is recognised. This is also found in *Āpastamba Dharma sūtra*,³⁶ where a girl is said to be given to the family. In *Bṛhaspati smṛiti*³⁷ the custom of giving a daughter to the family is a *Kalivarjya* one, that is as one of the type not to be followed in the Kali-age. This emphasizes another important aspect clearly, viz. that it was a custom prevalent in the past but abolished by the time of the writer.

There is also another tradition according to which first the brothers and then the kinsmen had a right to marry the widow of the deceased family member.³⁸ The Epics abound in examples illustrating this tradition, discussed elsewhere. Some of which are *Tarā* and *Sugrīva*, *Mandodarī* and *Vibhīṣaṇa* wherein the widow of the elder brother actually marries the brother-in-law, and *Sītā* and *Lakṣmaṇa* wherein a suggestion to the same effect is made. The *Smṛiti* writers on the other hand restrict the intimacy of the widow and her brother-in-law to the institution of *niyoga* according to which the brother-in-law or the kinsman was allowed to raise a child on the widow,⁴⁰ only when her husband died childless and the widow desired it.

³⁵ Meyer quotes this case as a probable example of group-marriage remarking: "It is, indeed, a strange thing to find a usage, which aroused the moral feelings of the Indians, unhesitatingly ascribed to the priest of gods, *Bṛhaspati*, and to his brother, . . . and one feels tempted to look upon such things as echoes from a time when among even the Aryans also group marriage may have been a recognised institution . . . Yet there is always left a certain doubt as to the actual state existing in those days". (Meyer, J. J., *Sexual Life in India*, Vol. 1, pp. 114-115.) There is nothing in the Epic to warrant Meyer's inference of group marriage and strange it is that he himself doubts the probability of what he infers. It is very probable that the entire story is a fantastic fabrication interpolated to explain the etymology of the name *Dīrghatamas*. This story is narrated in *Bṛhaddevata*, 4, 11-13.

³⁶ *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra*—as quoted in *Dharmakoṣa*, p. 198.

³⁷ *Bṛhaspati*—As quoted in the *Dharmakoṣa* at p. 1030.

³⁸ *Kautilya*, III, 4.

³⁹ *Bṛhaspati*—as quoted in *Dharmakoṣa*, p. 1030.

⁴⁰ P. V. Kāne, *History of Dharmasāstras*, Vol. II, pp. 614-615.

Thus that the attitude of the Epics towards polyandry is absolutely hostile is certain. Though polyandry is accepted as an ancient tradition both by the Epic as well as the Sūtra and Smṛti literature, it has become quite repugnant to society of the Epic period and was not in keeping with the sexual standard of those days. An instance of a polyandrous marriage like that of Pāṇḍava-Draupadi is "specially explained away, glossed over and mystified."⁴¹

⁴¹ Monier Williams, *Indian Epic Poetry*, p. 10.

CHAPTER III

PREMARITAL SEX RELATIONS

In the Taittiriya Āraṇyaka (I,27) is to be found a reference to pregnant *kumāris*, and the Samhitās often refer to sons of unwedded mothers (*kumārīputras*) exposed and attacked by animals.¹ According to Upadhyaya even in the Ṛgveda unions without religious sanctions between men and women are not unknown.² This clearly indicates that premarital sex relations which were not completely unknown were socially tolerated. At the same time it seems, opinion was getting crystallized against such relations because issues of such relations are here suggested to be exposed to animals. Yet often enough, the repugnance expressed by people towards the children from such relations may not have been of an intensity, strong enough to affect notably the social status of such an illegitimate offspring, particularly if the child proved to be a man of strong moral character as in the case of Satyakāma Jābāla. Satyakāma Jābāla openly admitted that he was an illegitimate child of a maid servant and yet he was admitted as a pupil of a famous preceptor, in consequence to his speaking the truth.

The conclusions with regard to the state of sex-ethics of unmarried girls as gathered from the Epic data tallies with the tradition as reflected in the Samhitās. Instances of unmarried girls having sexual relations with a man and attaining motherhood are to be found in the Epics. These girls in due course got married according to the usual religious rites and the children born in maidenhood are considered as belonging to the husbands of their mothers.

Vyāsa, the legendary compiler of the great Epic was himself a progeny of unwedded love.³ His mother Matsyagandhā, as the Epic narrates, was the foster daughter of a fisherman and rowed her father's ferry boat from one shore of the Ganges to the other. Once sage Parāśara happened to be a passenger in her ferry boat.

¹ Vajrasneyi Samhitā, XXX, 6. as quoted in the Vedic Index, Vol. I, p. 396.

² B. S. Upadhyaya, Women in the Ṛgveda, p. 194.

³ Mbh., I, 51-56

The fair fisherwoman attracted his attention at once, and soon a desire to enjoy her arose in his mind. He accordingly expressed his desire. Matsyagandhā refused him on the plea that she was ashamed of cohabiting in public with so many people on both shores looking upon them.⁴ But the sage at once created a mist round the boat so that nobody could see them. Wonderstruck at this miracle, the maiden spoke again, "Know me to be a maiden, O brilliant one, under the protection of my father. My maidenhood would lapse by your contact; how then, shall I be able to return home? I shall not be able to stay at my father's house here after. Consider all this first and then act as you like."⁵ The girl was relieved of her fear by a promise on the part of the sage that her maidenhood would be restored to her after the intercourse.⁶ The sage further undertook to grant Matsyagandhā any boon she cared to ask. Accordingly Matsyagandhā expressed the desire that a sweet perfume should emanate from her body. The sage granted it and the intercourse between the two took place in the boat. As a result of the union Matsyagandhā, now also known as Yojanagandhā because of the pleasing odour coming out from her body for miles together, at once gave birth to a child whom she cast off on an island in the Yamunā river. The child—because he was cast off on an island (*dvīpa*)—was called Dvaipāyana.⁷

Parāśara's spontaneous proposal to a fair fisherwoman without any idea of marriage with her indicates that such relations must not have been altogether unusual. Matsyagandhā's pretext that she could not accept Parāśara's proposal because she was still under the protection of her father, besides pointing towards an absolute patriarchy where the head of the family wielded absolute power over the children; also indicates that she herself had no scruples so far as her virginity was concerned. Parāśara's offer to grant her virginity back after the intercourse seems to be a later addition to the original story to accommodate the require-

⁴ Mbh., I, 57, 58

⁵ Mbh., I, 57, 61-62.

⁶ Mbh., I, 57, 63.

⁷ In the same Parva when Matsyagandhā (as Satyavatī) narrates this episode to Bhiṣma, she says that she agreed to the proposal of Parāśara because she was afraid of a curse if she were to refuse him. She also states that the child born out of the union was cast off by her on the island as instructed by the sage himself, so that she might be a virgin again. Mbh., I, 99, 9-12.

ments of the later concept of chastity, according to which virginity must have been an essential pre-requisite of marriage and hence prized as a virtue for unmarried women. The excuse, as put forward later on by her, for her acceptance of proposal, namely, the fear of the curse, may point to a state of social hierarchy where probably brahmins and great sages were not unknown to take advantage of their position and where women of a lower status must have submitted to the pressure of their demand due to the fear of a curse. The whole thing thus is a brahmanic innovation, firstly, to make excusable the loose behaviour of Matsyagandhā by providing an excuse for her, and secondly to emphasize the mysterious power of a brahmin's curse.

Kuntī,⁸ the mother of the Pāṇḍava heroes had to undergo a similar experience. But in her story, we find a stubborn resistance to the advances of god Sūrya, in contrast to the meek resistance of Matsyagandhā. When Kuntī was still a young girl and was staying with her foster father Kuntibhoja, she was entrusted with the task of receiving guests and treating them well. Once the famous sage Durvāsa happened to be their guest. Kuntī served him so sincerely and faced the ordeal set by his idiosyncracies so well that despite the fact that he was a very difficult man, the sage was pleased to grant her a boon. She was taught five *mantras*. By reciting each, she could command any of the gods to her service and conceive through him. Immature as she was, on receiving the boon Kuntī became very curious and just to test it, she invited Sūrya by reciting *mantras*. The god appeared before her at once and was ready to be of use to her for the bestowal of a son, strong and refulgent like his own self. Kuntī however wanted Sūrya to return to his abode. She apologised for calling him, saying it was only due to a maidenly curiosity that she had invited him. But once called, Sūrya refused to return without fulfilling his office and threatened to curse the girl's father as well as the brahmin who so foolishly bestowed a boon on such an immature girl. Kuntī was now in a fix. Again she pleaded with Sūrya on moral grounds saying, "Only my parents and elders can bestow me to any person. Nor do I want to destroy my *dharma* because in this world the safe keeping of the body is held in honour as the virtuous way of woman's life. So please forgive my childish

⁸ Mbh., III, 290.

curiosity and return to your place.”⁹ But Sūrya was not ready to put himself in a ridiculous position by going back without his fulfilling the purpose for which his presence was desired. Kuntī becoming afraid of the curse upon her family with which he threatened her agreed to submit herself to Sūrya saying that any relative of her could bestow her on Sūrya if he thought that what they were doing was according to *dharmā*.¹⁰ But Sūrya did not think it necessary to inform any of her relatives because he declared: “Neither your father, nor your mother, nor any of your elders have any right over you.” He also said that a woman was free to behave as she liked.¹¹ Yet he demolished the fears of Kuntī by telling her that after the intercourse she would regain her virginity and that the son born of the union would be very famous.¹²

Kuntī is only half convinced by these arguments but once assured that her chastity would be restored, and what is still more important being afraid of the god’s curse she yielded to the god, definitely unwillingly—as if dazed by his refulgent personality. In due course she gave birth to the mighty Karna bedecked with an armour and earrings right at birth as was promised by Sūrya; but due to the fear of the kinsfolk she put him in a chest and floated the chest into the Ganges. And none but an old nurse knew the secret.¹³

The difference between the attitude of the two maidens towards the persons who approached them as reflected in the episodes narrated above is noteworthy. Matsyagandhā, the daughter of a fisherman accustomed to mix with all sorts of people did not hesitate much before yielding to the sage. Her only strong ground for refusal is based upon the fear of her parents, viz., that if she lost her virginity without their consent, she might not be accepted by them into their house thereafter and then she did not know where to go. Kuntī’s refusal on the other hand is based not only on the ground of this fear but even more on the moral degradation that is involved. Reared up as a king’s fond daughter and always encircled by nobility, she had fixed ideas about the manner in which

⁹ Mbh., III, 290, 22.

¹⁰ Mbh., III, 290, 8-11.

¹¹ Ref. Chapt. I., p. 5.

¹² Mbh., III, 291, 12-16.

¹³ Mbh., III, 292, 2-6.

a lady should behave and so she is terribly shocked by the proposal. She tries to convince Sūrya that chastity is the first virtue in a good woman. Fear of a curse, however, did not dictate to Matsyagandhā the course she took. It is only in a later version—and in a different context—the narration of the episode by herself to Bhīṣma,—her stepson—that she talks of the fear of the curse, perhaps to save her face from the shame of yielding.

It should be noted that in both the episodes the father is said to be the proper person to hand over the girl in marriage and hence sex relation without his knowledge and permission was against *dharma*. Before marriage a maiden was the property of her father and was not independent to bestow herself to anybody. Recalling that *svayamvara* was an accepted type of marriage, even the *svayamvara* was arranged by the father.

Each of them, however, leaves the child born, to nature's mercy. Matsyagandhā for the sake of convenience at the bidding of sage Parāśara himself, while Kuntī to hide her shame. Matsyagandhā in her married life as Satyawatī makes no secret that she had a son before marriage. Not only that she even frankly confesses everything to her stepson Bhīṣma and invites Vyāsa for *niyoga* with her daughter-in-laws. Kuntī keeps the birth of Karna a secret. Even though she desired on at least one special occasion to open her heart in connection with it, she is not able to do so. It is at the end of the Mahābhārata war that she reveals this to Yudhiṣṭhira and invites his censure. The difference in behaviour is not easily explained. It may be due to the brahmanic glorification of the Pāṇḍava brothers as the ideal heroes of the family, as also the way the two—Matsyagandhā and Kuntī—were brought up.

But from the above data one fact emerges out clearly. A woman could not have or keep to herself a child born during her unmarried condition indicating thereby that she was not supposed to have a child before marriage; and that if this ever happened it brought shame and disgrace to the family of the woman concerned. This conclusion is further supported by a story narrated in the Rāmāyaṇa. It is found in the Uttarakāṇḍa (Chapter 3) and hence is of a much later origin. The great sage Pulatsya was performing penance in a very beautiful forest. Attracted by the natural beauty of that forest, many a damsels and apsaras came there to enjoy themselves and so Pulatsya was constantly disturbed by their

merry making. Much enraged at this state of things he put a curse on the place saying: "if any maiden will come within my sight, she will become pregnant at once." Once the daughter of king Tṛṇabindu accidentally entered the hermitage of the sage and she became a prey to his curse. Returning to her father she reported the physical change she had undergone. Her father approached the sage immediately and requested him to get married with the girl. Pulatsya did so gladly, and later Viśravā-Rāvaṇa's father was born. This episode wherein the king at once hands over the pregnant girl in marriage to a person who caused the pregnancy-be it by cohabitation or even miraculously as in the episode under consideration indicates, clearly that it was necessary that a child be born within a wedlock.

The episode of Mādhavī¹⁴ as described in the story of Gālava also lays stress on virginity as a virtue even when cohabitation is allowed. After serving for a thousand years, Gālava, a disciple of Viśvāmitra, obtained the latter's permission to return home. On his repeated inquiry as to what fees he should pay, the sage became very angry and asked him to bring eight hundred horses each with a body as refulgent as the moon, but with one ear black. Gālava was much puzzled and sought the help of his friend Garuda, who took him to king Yayāti. Yayāti did not possess the horses so he gave Gālava his beautiful daughter Mādhavī in return of whom he would get his desired object.¹⁵ Gālava proceeded from one king to another along with the girl but nobody possessed such eight hundred horses, each a replica of a porto-type. There were only six hundred such horses in existence, their ownership being divided amongst three different kings. Now Gālava was facing a dilemma but Mādhavī herself found a way out of this. She told Gālava that a Brahmin learned in the vedas had given her a boon according to which after each delivery she would be a virgin again. When Gālava got this assurance, he gave the girl in turn to the three different kings in marriage and as the bride-price, asked the horses possessed by each. The condition of the marriage was that the girl, Mādhavī should be returned to him again after a son was born to her. Thus Gālava obtained six hundred horses. In place of the remaining two hundred horses,

¹⁴ Mbh., V, 106ff. (Eom. Ed.)

¹⁵ Mbh., V, 113, 11-13, (Eom. Ed.)

Mādhavi herself was offered by Gālava to Viśvāmitra, to whom also she bore a son. Viśvāmitra was quite satisfied with this type of *gurudakṣiṇā* and reproached Gālava saying that instead of the horses, he would have gladly accepted the girl himself and begotten four sons.

In the above episode Mādhavi accepts the situation in which she is put without any hesitation. Perhaps this is a sign of obedience to her father who was the sole judge of his daughter's morals.

In all the episodes narrated above what emerges as a common factor is that the maiden had sexual relations before getting duly married, for one reason or the other, and also had a child. But in all these three episodes the virginity of the girl is restored after the intercourse takes place and one mysterious explanation or another is given as to how that happens. Either it is through the boon of a brahmin or some god. When Draupadī contracts a polyandrous marriage with the Pāṇḍavas it is mentioned that her maidenhood is restored to her everytime she got married with one of the brothers. Thus she got married with one brother, stayed with him for the night and still "the lovely one with the glorious waist, the very mighty one, at the end of each day became a maiden again."¹⁶ This very emphasis on virginity as a necessary pre-nuptial condition indicates that a definite change in the sex-ethics in the Epics has taken place viz. that virginity formerly not valued as a virtue in unmarried women has now become a necessary moral virtue by the time of the present version of the Epic, and any lapses during maidenhood came to be condoned by mysterious explanations or divine sanctions.

Marriage of Mādhavi with different kings is not an instance of a casual sex relation like other cases but an instance of remarriage of a married woman, indicating that one marriage can be annulled on the fulfilment of one condition and a second marriage may be brought about.¹⁷

¹⁶ Mbh., I, 190, 14.

¹⁷ This type of conditional marriage is a peculiarity of the Epics and one notes many such illustrations in the Epics. Thus in the Ādiparva, it is related that Arjuna contracts two such marriages. First, with the Nāga damsel Ulūpi and second, with the Manipur princess Citrāṅgadā. With Ulūpi he stays but for one night. Both these marriages end when a son is born and the husband and wife separate after that. In the marriage of Bhīma and Hidimbā an actual condition is laid down that Bhīma would separate from

We have already noticed in the above instances how children born out of pre-marital sex relations were generally unwanted and hence abandoned. This brings out the social code of morality: a woman was not supposed to have any child before marriage and if this ever happened it brought shame and disgrace to the family.

The lapses already committed are all either by brahmin sages or mythical personalities like the god Sun. They are somehow condoned during the brahmanification of the Epic, the sons born of such illicit unions being glorified as either great heroes or great sages.

In the transitional stage sons of unmarried women were found as members of society and were given a definite name of *kānīna* and throughout the whole range of Smṛti literature the status of illicit children is discussed and defined.

In the list of various types of sons given in the Ādiparva (I,111) *kānīna* ranks fifth in number and is placed after the son of a re-married widow. Yet he takes a higher place than an adopted or a bought son, while in Manu¹⁸ *kānīna* is placed seventh in the list and is not considered as worthy to inherit his family's property (*abandhu*). An adopted and a made (*krtrima*) son are placed higher than a *kānīnā* son by Manu. The list given in the Anuśāsana-parva,¹⁹ tallies with that of Manu. Bṛhaspati (XXV, 39, 41) denounces a *kānīna* along with a *kṣetrāja* and a *guḍhaja* son in very clear terms.

Hidimbā as soon as a son is born to her and so he did. Another variety of the same type is represented by the marriage of Gangā and Śāntanu where the former makes a condition that Śāntanu should not interfere in her personal matters. Accordingly Śāntanu is non-interfering even when Gangā drowns seven children born out of the union. However, when the eighth son is born, Śāntanu prevents Gangā from drowning him and because the condition is broken, Gangā leaves the child with Śāntanu and goes away.

This type of conditional marriage can be traced in the hymns of the R̥gveda. The dialogue hymn between Urvasī and Purūravā (X,95) shows that Urvasī married Purūravā on a condition that he should not appear naked before her and should look after her ewes. The Gāndharva who wanted Urvasī back with them cheated the king by making noise like ewes and the king went naked to protect them. Urvasī saw him and went away.

Cf. B. S. Upadhyaya, Women in R̥gveda, P. 71.

¹⁸ Manu, IX, 159-160.

¹⁹ Mbh., XIII, 49, 3-5 (Bom. ed) (as interpreted by P. V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstras, Vol. III. pp. 644-5.)

The Anuśāsanaparva which parallels Manu in the gradation of sons would not justify us to believe that the attitude of the Epic writer confirmed to that of Manu. In spite of its strong attitude, the Anuśāsanaparva (49, 20-21. Bom. Ed.) grants the status of sonship to all the sons. Vyāsa is invited for *niyoga* relations with the queens of Vicitravīrya not only as a renowned sage but as an elder brother of Śāntanu as mentioned in the present version of the Epic. Similar is the case of Karna. He is not condemned when Yudhiṣṭhira came to know that he was an illegitimate child of Kuntī, but treating him as his brother he offered him water libations. Not only that but even Karna's right to inheritance is accepted by Yudhiṣṭhira when he declares that if he would have been conversant with the fact of his kinship with the former, he would have gladly resigned his right to throne in his favour.²⁰

The Epic thus considers a prenuptial child as belonging to the husband of the mother and sharing equal rights with the other children of the mother born in wedlock. It should be noted here that in spite of this the husband of the mother is never addressed as the father of such a child. Vyāsa is repeatedly addressed as the son of Parāśara and Karna as the son of Sūrya and not of Pāṇḍu. This indicates that children were supposed to belong to their progenitor—a view taken by the Dharmaśāstras. The difference of opinion registered by the Dharmaśāstra writers as to whether a seed sown into another's field belonged to the sower of the seed or to the owner of the field is instructive here. Manu in very definite terms declares that a seed sown in the field of another belongs to the owner of the field and not to the sower.²¹ And perhaps it is on the strength of this principle that he declares *kānīna* and *sahoḍha* sons as belonging to the legally wedded husband of the girl and not to their progenitor.²²

The fore-going survey of prenuptial sex-morals clearly indicates the fact that girls remained unmarried till they attained puberty. The Vedic marriage ritual as revealed in the famous marriage hymn of the R̥gveda describing the marriage of Sūrya clearly indicates that the bride was quite grown up so that consummation of marriage could take place immediately and she was of an age fit for

²⁰ Mbh., Jalpradānika parva, 27, 23-25 (Bom. Ed.).

²¹ Manu, IX, 32-55.

²² Manu, IX, 172-173.

procreation. In fact consummation was an essential part of vedic marriage ritual.²³ Not only that, the vedic tradition²⁴ confirms instances of many maidens growing old in their father's house, to avert which disaster, the Atharva-veda²⁵ prescribes many potions and secret spells. The romantic marriages and descriptions of youths falling in love with maidens and their attempts to acquire them in marriage essentially establish the fact that marriage was contracted only between two persons fully grown up.²⁶ The Br̥had-samhitā (68, 10) gives a remarkable statement to the effect that a woman is not fully grown till she is twenty. Upadhyaya further tries to prove the existence of late marriages firstly by emphasizing the occurrence of the words used to denote women (viz. *Kanyā*, *Yuvatī*, *Yośā*) most of which according to him refer to unmarried maidens signifying their mature youthful age; and secondly by reference to the ceremony of addressing the *Gāndharva Viśvāvasu* in the form of a rod lying in the nuptial bed who is considered to be in charge of the woman till her husband takes over the charge. (R.V.X,85, 21-22.).²⁷ Almost all the lady characters of the Epic are fully grown up at the time of their marriage. The heroines of the Epics like Draupadī, Śakuntalā, Damayantī, Sāvitrī, Kuntī, Satyavatī and others who were not only physically mature but also showed a profound mental maturity at the time of marriage. It has been a long established fact by now that the case of Rāma marrying Sītā at the age of six, as a later portion of Rāmāyaṇa tries to suggest is but a later interpolation. This gets strengthened by the fact that there is no other reference to pre-puberty marriage either in Rāmāyaṇa or Mahābhārata. It is therefore more reasonable to assume that prepuberty marriage must have been so strong by the time of the final compilation of Rāmāyaṇa that such attempts must have been boldly made to

²³ Cf. B. S. Upadhyaya; "Women in R̥gveda", p. 50.

²⁴ R̥gveda, I, 117, 7; II, 17, 7; X, 39, 3; X, 405, (Vedic Index, Vol. I, p. 474).

²⁵ Atharvaveda, 111, 8; R̥gveda X, 145; XI, 89-102, 103, 131; VII, 36-38. (Vedic Index, Vol. I, p. 474)

²⁶ R̥gveda, I, 115, 2; Atharvaveda. II, 30; III, 25; VI, 8-9; 82.

R̥gveda, I, 167, 3; IX, 32, 5—depicts mutual affection.

R̥gveda, I, 117, 18—refers to lovers bestowing gifts.

(Vedic Index, Vol. I, p. 474)

²⁷ B. S. Upadhyaya, "Women in R̥gveda", p. 51-53.

bring the marriage of the popular hero on par with the special traditions of the time.²⁸

Manu (IX, 94) recommends a girl of twelve years to be given in marriage to a man of thirty and a girl of eight years for a man of twenty four. Even in the early *sūtras* such as the Mānava (I, VII, 8) and Gobhila (III, IV, 6), the rule prescribing a very low age for the bride is recorded.²⁹ The Anusāsana parva³⁰ also lays down: "A man thirty years old should marry a *nagnikā* ten years old ; if he is twenty one years old he should marry a girl seven years old". In spite of such injunctions, however, the general prevalence of marriages after puberty can be concluded from the descriptions of such rites as the *caturthikarma* in the Grhyasūtras, indicating the consummation of marriage on the fourth day.³¹

The custom of pre-puberty marriage does not seem to be a practice even at the time of Manu because he (IX, 91) declares that a girl should be given away within three years of the appearance of menstruation and if the father of the girl fails in his duty to do so, the girl is advised to find out a suitable husband by herself. The later Smṛti writers however curtail the period to three months from three years.³² Not only that but the fact that the marriage of a girl who has achieved puberty is further emphasized by the fact that she should be bestowed upon an unworthy person if a suitable match is not found as against the injunction of Manu who allows a girl in such circumstances to remain unmarried in her father's house, till death.³³ Not only that but different types of marriages between people of mature age were allowed. Thus the warrior class was permitted to marry by capture or to form love matches generally. Pre-puberty marriages thus must have made their first appearance earliest in the medieval period.

Here we see two traits running parallel together—emphasis on virginity and advocacy of early marriages. It is difficult to say whether early marriages led to an emphasis on virginity or whether emphasis on virginity was a potent factor in the advocacy of early

²⁸ Cf. A. S. Attekar, "Position of Women in Hindu Culture" pp. 62-113.

²⁹ As quoted in the Encyclopedia of Ethics and Religion, Vol. VIII, p. 423ff.

³⁰ Mbh., XIII, 44, 14 (Bom. Ed.)

³¹ V. M. Apte, Social and Religious Life in the Grhya Sūtras; pp. 47-48.

³² Cf. Gautama XVII, 20; Viṣṇu 24, 41; Mahābhārata III, 277, 32.

³³ Cf. Manu, IX, 89.

marriages. A tradition in the Mahābhārata which may not be reliable for assigning priority to either is however recorded here. Accordingly an unmarried girl when in her *ṛtu* had a right to satisfy herself and for that purpose she could offer herself to any man she chose and it also became a duty for that man to satisfy her by begetting a son on her. King Yayāti was married to Devayānī—the daughter of the preceptor of the demon king. Along with other things she brought Śarmiṣṭhā—the daughter of the demon king in her dowry. Śarmiṣṭhā, young and beautiful as she was—offered herself to Yayāti saying that her *ṛtu* should not be wasted. Yayāti then had four sons on her. When Devayānī came to know about this she became very jealous and angry and questioned the king. Yayāti however put forward an excuse saying, “I have only performed my *dharma* in complying with the desire of the daughter of the demon king who was in her *ṛtu*, and who requested me to satisfy her. A person who does not satiate a woman in her *ṛtu*, incurs the sin of killing a foetus.”³⁴ It is quite possible that Yayāti might have been enamoured of Śarmiṣṭhā and later on offered an acceptable excuse. But this very ground can very well be served to hasten the marriage of a maiden.³⁵

The evolution of the concept of pre-nuptial chastity found an expression in the fact that only a virgin bride could be married according to *dharma*. This requirement is mentioned in the laws of marriage in the Gṛhyasūtras and Dharmasūtras in general. Marriage formulas are intended only for a maiden.³⁶ Thus, only that form of marriage wherein a maiden is duly bestowed upon the groom by the guardian of the girl is within the pale of *dharma*.

The fact that a bride should necessarily be a virgin debars even the remarriage of widows. Manu explicitly lays down that a bride could be given away but once.³⁷ The diadaetic portions of the Epics tally with Manu when they allow only a widow whose marriage is not consummated (*akṣatā yoni*) to remarry either the brother-in-law or a kinsman,³⁸ but without the recitation of the formal marriage

³⁴ Mbh., I, 72, 31-33, 46.

³⁵ J. Joly, Hindu law and Custom, p. 131.

³⁶ Encyclopedea of Religion & Ethics, Vol. VIII, Note—Marriage, p. 452.

³⁷ Manu, IX, 47.

³⁸ Mbh., XIII, 44, 53-54 (Bom. Ed.); Manu, IX, 76.

sacraments. The later *kalivarjya* rules however forbid the re-marriage of even a virgin widow.³⁹

The concept of virginity not only restricted pre-marital sex liberty but also curtailed the right of a woman to contract a second marriage after the death of her husband as marriage can only be of a virgin. Chastity is not only demanded of a woman as a necessary pre-nuptial condition, but is also enforced upon her after the demise of her husband. These, along with an advocacy of complete fidelity during the wedlock creates ground for a social ideal of *pātivratya*.

³⁹ P. V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstras, Vol. III, p. 931.

CHAPTER IV

FIDELITY IN WEDLOCK

Sexual relationship is regulated by norms and customs. Hence it is not a matter of surprise if with the growth of moral ideas in a particular society, the regulations change from an earlier phase reflecting comparatively greater freedom of sex behaviour in marriage to the later phases where relations smack more of proprietary right in women.

Even in the Vedic *saṁhitās*, which relate mainly to the religious life of the Aryan people, references to sex relation outside wedlock are noticed here and there. Words like *mahānagna* and *jāra* which means lover of a married woman warrant the existence perhaps rare, perhaps frequent of lovers of a married woman.¹ But besides these words there are passages in the rituals where married woman's overtures with strangers are recorded. In the Taittirīya *saṁhitā* a special penance is prescribed for a man who is to perform the sacred *agnicayana* for the first time. He is no more to have intercourse with *rāmā* (wife of a *śūdra*) and must abstain thence from intercourse with the wife of another man.² In the *varuṇapraghās* ceremony the wife of the person offering sacrifice is required by the priest to name her paramours. Were she not to admit while in reality she had them, then the sacrifice would be fruitless. But if she confessed her guilt neither the woman, nor her lover or lovers incurred any blemish. The sacrifice would be fruitful.³ Does this in any way mean that adultery did not result in any social censure? Elsewhere in the same *brhāmaṇa* Yājñavalkya remarks, "Who cares whether the wife is unchaste or not."⁴ The Atharva-veda mentions a charm directed against the wife's paramour who is a "slave winning her love by sheer physical strength."⁵

¹ Vedic Index Vol. I, p. 140. Also Cf. B. S. Upadhyaya, Women in R̥gveda, p. 195.

² Taittirīya Saṁhitā, V, 6, 83.

³ Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, II, 5, 2, 20.

⁴ Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, I, 3, 1, 21.

⁵ B. S. Upadhyaya, Women in R̥gveda, p. 4.

Yajurveda also alludes even to *śūdra* male and *Arya* female connections. In later literature such a connection is considered a crime carrying capital punishment.⁶ In the *Grhyasūtras* however, adultery is severely criticised and is often mentioned as a sin.⁷ In the *Hiranyakesin Grhyasūtra* we read, "If my mother (or grandmother) has gone astray unmindful of her duty towards her husband, may my father (or grandfather) accept that sperm as his own." The *Sāṅkhāyana Grhyasūtra* prescribes in the middle of the *aśṭaka* rite a special *mantra* for the sacrificer atoning for the sin of his mother in case he may be an illegitimate child.⁸ A rite is prescribed for *dārāgupti* or the guarding of the wife's chastity. In the *garbhādhāna* rites one of the *mantras* to be recited while embracing the wife is this, "Whatever there is in your body death-bringing to thy husband, that I make death bringing to thy paramour."⁹ A *snātaka* is warned against wishing for sport with the wife of a *śrotriya* who knows the *mantra* that destroys the wife's lover.

All these illustrations and injunctions prove that right from the vedic period lapses during wedlock were connived at. It does not necessarily mean that they were frequent and socially encouraged. It can only mean that society had not laid down very strict rules with regard to marital fidelity. This is evident from the attitude of the Epic writer who refers to the regulation as introduced for the first time by Śvetaketu in respect of the sex behaviour of married women.¹⁰ According to it, a woman if permitted by husband or in other such circumstances, could hold sexual relations with a person for the purpose of procreation. If she refused to do so it was a sin. Absolute fidelity in marriage, wherein sexual relations outside wedlock, even for the purpose of procreation were not approved of, is held to be the ideal in support of which is cited an example of the chaste queen Bhadrā¹¹, who when forced to procure sons from outside agency conceived them by lying by the side of the corpse of her husband through the power of her chastity. In spite of this a view which permits a woman to hold sex-relations

⁶ Vaj. Sam. XXIII, 30-31 ; Taitt. Sam. VII, 4, 19, 2-3.

⁷ V. M. Apte, Social and Religious Life in the *Grhyasūtras*, p. 108.

⁸ *Sāṅkhāyana Grhyasūtra* III, 13, 5.

⁹ *Āśvalāyana Grhyasūtra*, I. 245.

¹⁰ Mbh., I, 113, 9.

¹¹ Mbh., I, 112, 7.

with another person with the permission of her husband is also upheld. It is considered no sin. A story in *Anuśāsana parva*¹² reads: A brahmin named Sudarśana was so adamant with regard to his duty as a householder that he would never refuse anything to a guest. He had also instructed his wife Oghavatī to follow the same principle. Once Dharma visited his hermitage disguised as a brahmin guest to test his vow. Sudarśana was away so his wife Oghavatī welcomed the guest in the usual manner. But the guest declared that he was not satisfied with the welcome. He expressed the desire for sexual intercourse with Oghavatī which alone would make the welcome satisfactory according to him. Remembering the instructions of her husband to satisfy a guest at any cost Oghavatī consented to his proposal and both retired in the hut for sexual pleasure. Sudarśana returned to his hermitage and called out for his wife. But instead of his wife the brahmin replied from the hut, "Your wife at present is offering me a welcome by having sexual intercourse with me. You may do what you think fit to be done." Sudarśana said, "O Best of the brahmins, do whatever you like . . . My whole life, wealth and wife are dedicated to the service of guests." Dharma was much pleased with Sudarśana and blessed him and his wife. Though the episode is singular in its occurrence, could it in anyway indicate the prevalence of a tradition of offering one's wife to a guest—a custom prevalent, in many primitive tribes?¹³

It was considered proper that an abductor could carry away a woman, married or unmarried if he had conquered the guardian of that woman. When Jayadratha, the king of the Sindhu country tried to kidnap Draupadī, the chaplain of the Pāṇḍavas, Dhaumya tried to prevent him saying, "O Jayadratha, You cannot abduct Draupadī without defeating the Pāṇḍavas. Try to remember the ancient *dharma* of the kṣatriyas."¹⁴ Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā is stamped by Sītā herself as a mean robbery because she was being carried away in her husband's absence without a fight.¹⁵ When Draupadī is won over as a stake in the gambling bout and brought to the Kaurava assembly, Duryodhana uncovers his left

¹² Mbh., XIII, 2, (Bom. Ed.)

¹³ E. Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, Vol. I, p. 228.

¹⁴ Mbh., III, 252, 24.

¹⁵ Rāmāyaṇa, *Aryanyakāṇḍa*, 53, 6.

thigh (supposed to be reserved for amorous pleasures as opposed to the right thigh reserved for children) and invites her to sit on it, indicating that since Draupadī had been won, he had a right to have sexual relations with her.¹⁶ Of course this behaviour of Duryodhana is duly punished by Bhīma breaking his thighs in the mace fight in the course of the Mahābhārata war.¹⁷ This is to satisfy the demands of the later code of sex ethics. This tradition survives even amongst the diadalectic portions of the Epics also. The Śāntiparva puts abduction of another's wife in the same category as robbing another's property and prescribes the same atonement for both the sins.¹⁸ The Anuśāsana parva places the sin of adultery with the sin of robbing a brahmin's wealth.¹⁹

A legend narrated in the Anuśāsana parva²⁰ reminds us of the influence of the tradition in which mighty god Varuṇa abducts the wife of a brahmin,—a legend, where both the abductor as well as abducted woman are not punished by the husband of the woman. Bhadrā, Candra's daughter was given away in marriage to Utathya because he was very beautiful and was also approved by Bhadrā herself. God Varuṇa wanted the girl for himself. So once, when Utathya was out, he went to the forest regions of Yamunā and carried away Bhadrā to his own under-water mansions, and enjoyed her there. Through Nārada Utathya came to know about his wife's abduction and sent him as a messenger to Varuṇa with a message to free his wife. "Tell him in harsh words to return my wife. Why has he abducted her?" Tell Him, "You are the protector of people and so you are called *Lokapāla* (protector). You should not be the destroyer of people." Nārada conveyed the message to Varuṇa but Varuṇa said, "This woman is now my beloved wife and I do not desire to return her." Nārada thus failed in his mission. So Utathya became very angry and by the power of his austerities stopped the water of the whole world and started drinking them. In spite of this Varuṇa did not return Utathya's wife to her

¹⁶ Mbh., II, 63, 10-14.

¹⁷ This is simply a later innovation which serves two purposes, firstly to introduce the new concept of sex ethics according to which Duryodhana's unchivalrous behaviour is punished by Bhīma and secondly to conceal the breach of the war-ethics on the part of Bhīma as is discussed elsewhere.

¹⁸ Mbh., XII, 36, 22.

¹⁹ Mbh., XIII, 12, 1-4. (Bom. Ed.)

²⁰ Mbh., XIII, 154. (Bom. Ed.)

husband. Then that angry brahmin told the earth, "O beneficent one show me the abode of Varuṇa consisting of six lakhs water streams." Then the ocean moved away and the salty bed of the ocean appeared. Utathya also asked the river Sarasvatī to turn its flow in another direction and make that land a desert. Thus Utathya dried up the water round the palace of Varuṇa and turned it into a desert. Varuṇa got frightened and returned Bhadrā to Utathya. Utathya was happy to have her back. Pleased as he was, he allowed all the waters that he had dried up to flow again, but as a punishment for Varuṇa's rude behaviour, he kept the area surrounding Varuṇa's palace dry, and turned it into a desert for ever.

Varuṇa, the upholder of morality himself carries away the unprotected wife of a brahmin ascetic without the least compunction. Nor is that all. He enthrones a married woman as his own wife and refuses to return her in spite of her husband's persistent demand. Bhadrā is received back by her husband in spite of her enforced conjugal infidelity. Similarly, god Varuṇa is not questioned or punished for his enforced intercourse with Bhadrā but for his reluctance to part with her and to make her permanently his wife. The legend is thus noteworthy because both the abductor and the abducted woman go scot-free. Varuṇa is however, scolded for his act of abduction by Nārada and the wordings of the message sent by Utathya to Varuṇa also indicate that what was done by Varuṇa was against the tradition of the society.

A stricter ethical code with regard to conjugal infidelity however is reflected in the Ramopākhyāna²¹ in Mahābhārata, wherein is described the abduction of unprotected Sītā by Rāvaṇa against her will. As a punishment for the folly not only is Rāvaṇa killed and his kingdom handed over to his brother who was Rāma's ally in the campaign, but Sītā who was unprotected and was carried away forcibly, is not accepted by her husband Rāma. He says, "O daughter of the Videha king, you are free to go wherever you like. I killed the *rāksasa* who carried you away because I did not want you to stay in his house in spite of having a husband like me till you became old. How can I, conversant with *dharma*, accept a woman fallen in another's hand to stay with me even for a moment? You may have broken your vow or preserved it,

²¹ Mbh., III, 275 ff.

but you are like an offering licked by a dog and I do not want you any more.”²²

The same feeling is also reported verbatim in the Rāmāyaṇa,²³ when it describes the meeting of Rāma and Sītā after Rāvaṇa’s death. “On seeing her, who was beloved to his heart, Rāma was tortured due to the fear of people’s censure. He addressed the lotus eyed Sītā in the midst of the *vānaras* and *rākṣasas*. “I have done that which cannot be achieved by other people without much difficulty. I have taken this trouble to fight and kill the giant and to conquer the south, just as in the days of yore, Agatsya had done by his austerities. But it was not for you. I wanted to wipe off the blemish to my renowned family. I cannot accept you, with a blemish on your character. Therefore, O daughter of Janaka, go wherever you like. Here are all the ten directions open to you. You are now of no use to me.”

On the evidence of Rāmāyaṇa itself, Sītā was absolutely chaste and had not committed breach of any moral law. Yet she is not accepted by her husband because he considered it against *dharma* to accept a woman fallen in another’s hand. Not even love can soften his heart as the Rāmāyaṇa shows. This shows a stricter code of sex ethics than the one noted above. The man who commits a moral breach is actually killed by the husband and in addition the wife though not a willing party to offence, is also punished. She is not accepted by her husband after she is freed from the residence of the abductor where she might have stayed for a while. Thus the ideal of marital fidelity now demands that even on an apparent doubt of infidelity, the wife could be discarded and the offender could be severely punished.

This sex ethics seems to have been accepted by the society also, because the fear of public censure is the other reason offered by Rāma for refusing to accept Sītā. The force of public opinion is seen in the fact that even when Rāma was satisfied with fire ordeal to which Sītā submitted on being asked by Rāma ; he was once again upset when the report, reached his ear : “How can he (Rāma) enjoy Sītā to his heart’s content—she who had been abducted by Rāvaṇa forcibly and was in his lap ? How is it that Rāma is not disgusted with her, who was taken to Lankā and was kept in capti-

²² Mbh., III, 275, 11-13.

²³ Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, 116, 1ff.

vity in the *Aśoka* forest under the guard of the *Rākṣasas*. Similarly will behave our wives because people follow the example of the kings."²⁴ Even *Rāvaṇa*'s touch while she was being forcibly carried away, is considered enough to make *Sītā* impure. This report so unnerved *Rāma* that even in spite of his being convinced that *Sītā* was chaste, he decided to disown her. The conflict of emotions in *Rāma*'s heart torn between his love towards *Sītā* and his family tradition to submit to public opinion, is vividly brought out by *Bhavabhūti* in his *Uttarā Rāmācaritam*.

Altekar believes²⁵ that *Rāma*'s disowning of *Sītā* as his wife after her return from *Rāvaṇa*'s captivity as described in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* was a later interpolation to strengthen the sex-ethics given in the *Uttarkāṇḍa*. As noted by him, *Vaśiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (XXVIII, 2, 3) *Atri* (V, 35); *Parāśara* (X, 26, 7) and *Matsya Purāṇa* allow abducted women to be accepted back by their husbands. We have noted that while *Bhadrā* is accepted back, *Sītā* is refused acceptance by her husband. This refusal is a common feature of other episodes of the *Epics* also which will be duly narrated.

Instead of considering the episode in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* as an interpolation it would be better to consider it as an indication of the evolution towards a stricter code of sex ethics for which the *Epics* stand.

This interpretation is further corroborated by another legend,²⁶ describing *Agni*'s illegal passion for the wives of the seven *ṛsis*. *Agni* once fell in love with the seven wives of the *Saptarṣis* but they were so pure and chaste as to be unapproachable. Now *Svāhā*, the daughter of *Dakṣa* was in love with *Agni* but her love was unrequited. So she assumed the form of the wife of *Angirasa* by name *Śivā* and approached *Agni* requesting him to satisfy her passion. After the intercourse *Svāhā* thought it better to remove her disguise so that *Śivā* who was innocent may not incur any blemish and transforming herself into a she-eagle she carried the semen of *Agni* in her beak and threw it on the peak of a mountain covered with the *sara* trees. This she did six times each time disguising herself as a wife of one of the *ṛsis*. She could not how-

²⁴ *Rāmāyaṇa-Uttarakāṇḍa*, 43, 17-19.

²⁵ A. S. *Altekar*, *Position of Women in Hindu Culture*, p. 227, 16.

²⁶ *Mbh.*, III, 214, 215.

ever take on the disguise of Arundhatī, wife of Vasiṣṭha,—the last of the seven ṛsis because she was so pure and chaste that Svāhā could not transform herself into her form. Out of the semen dropped six times on the mountain top, was born Skanda, a wonder child with six faces and twelve hands. When the forest people were asked about his parentage, they said that he was the child of Agni begotten of the six wives of the great Saptarṣis. Having heard this, six of the Saptarṣis disowned their wives. Svāhā disclosed to the Saptarṣis, the fraud she had practiced as disguising herself as the wives of the six ṛsis. Viśvāmitra also knew the secret because he had followed Agni. He too reassured the Saptarṣis about the innocence of their wives but due to the fear of public censure the Saptarṣis did not accept their wives back. In this episode it is seen that though there is neither a regular abduction nor any sexual relation and although the women concerned are absolutely innocent, yet they receive punishment and are discarded by their husbands due to the fear of public opinion. Thus the parallel to the episode of Sītā is complete.

The Mahābhārata narrates the legend of the adulterous intercourse of Indra—another mighty god, with the wife of the sage Gautama.²⁷ The story runs thus: The sage Gautama had a son called Cirakārīka so called because he did all the things after much deliberations and thus took a very long time to accomplish even the smallest of tasks. Once his mother committed adultery with Indra, disguised as Gautama. Gautama himself saw this and was so much enraged that he ordered his son to kill his mother and then went away to the forest. But in the forest he repented his hasty

²⁷ The story of the illicit love between Ahalyā and Indra is very old and one of the oldest Brāhmaṇas viz. the Śatapatha (III, 3,4,18) addresses Indra as "Ahalyā's lover". (Cf. Śaḍvinś' Brāhmaṇa, I, 1; Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa, II, 79.) Unfortunately as Maxmuller remarks, it is one of the many legends about Indra's love affair about which very little is known. So it is difficult to make out whether adultery was committed with the consent of both the parties. But one thing emerges out clearly: this particular affair of Indra is labelled from the very beginning as a moral breach indicating thereby that transgression of wedlock ties was a moral breach and was censured by the society in spite of the otherwise lax morals as revealed by the Samhitās above. The whole episode may be an allegorical representation of some heavenly phenomenon. Kumārīlabhatta while discussing the above reference in Rāmāyaṇa mentions the whole myth as the symbolic representation of the natural phenomena of day-light overpowering the night.

decision in virtue of his learning the Vedas and of the patience inherent in his mental make up. He deliberated, "I presumed that Indra who came to our hermitage as a brahmin guest and who was properly worshipped and satisfied by me declaring him as my master would behave affectionately towards us. But instead he polluted my wife because of his passion. My wife is thus in no way a culprit in the crime. If examined from the point of view of *dharma*, neither my wife, nor myself, nor Indra is to be blamed. It is my own '*Yoga*' (concentration) that is to be blamed. Because the sages have said that jealousy is the source of all unhappiness and here I am submerged deeply in sin by entertaining jealousy." Reflecting thus he returned to his hermitage hoping that his son Cīrakārika according to his nature might not have completed the entrusted task of beheading his mother. Meanwhile Cīrakārika also had started pondering over the validity of the act entrusted to him, and had decided that whenever adultery was committed a woman was not guilty if she had not consented to it willingly. "When a woman commits adultery it is the man who is to be blamed. My mother who is otherwise chaste, consented to cohabit with Indra because she thought that he was her husband. Again women are physically weak and so they have to submit to the desires of men. So if a man leads a woman to adultery, the woman is not to be blamed." While he was thus pondering, he saw his father coming to the hermitage and fell at his feet. Gautama was very happy when he saw that Cīrakārika had not killed his mother and blessed him.

The whole episode is a little confused, because while at one place Indra is said to have polluted Gautama's wife by disguising as Gautama, at another place Gautama himself mentions that Indra visited the hermitage in the disguise of a brahmin guest.²⁸ But if we take our stand on the basis of the current form of the legend and accept that Indra came disguised as Gautama, we see a vast difference in the treatment of the sin of adultery between the two Epics. Indra, the real culprit escapes unharmed. While Gautama's wife, though a punishment is inflicted on her, also escapes it,

²⁸ A tradition of offering one's wife for hospitality to be found in the epic has already been noted earlier. It is probable that Indra might have visited the hermitage as a brahmin guest and must have approached Ahalyā disguised as such.

due to an afterthought on the part of the sage. Here it may be reasoned that the punishment is light because Ahalyā was led to adultery unknowingly. Āirakārika's arguments also convey the same opinion that if the woman was an unwilling party to the adulterous relations, she is not to be punished. But in spite of that a very severe punishment is contemplated at first. Unlike other episodes where the male offender is severely punished, here Indra escapes unscathed. The difference is to be noted in the attitude towards the sin of adultery. As far as the arguments of Āirakārika go in the case of such a crime, only the man was to be blamed and not the woman because she was the weaker sex and had to submit to the desires of a superior male, and as will emerge from further discussions, this is the set attitude of the Epic at large towards adultery.

Gautama, on the other hand, gives a subtle psychological analysis of human nature, tracing the instinct of jealousy as the basis of considering adultery as a crime and a sin.²⁹ And jealousy being opposed to Sadācāra (behaviour of good people), the whole sting out of adultery is removed. On the other hand it was sinful to consider adultery a sin. It is perhaps due to this attitude of mind that Gautama revokes the contemplated action against his wife and also does not punish Indra. Here too the husband is the final authority to pass judgment.

But if the wife willingly consented to an adulterous intercourse, she was severely punished like the male offender. This is obvious from the different version of this story in the Rāmāyaṇa wherein the punishment meted out to Gautama's wife is quite severe. According to this version³⁰ sage Gautama stayed in a forest hermitage with his wife Ahalyā and performed severe austerities. Once Indra disguised himself as Gautama and approached Ahalyā saying, "You are in your *ṛtu*. Let me cohabit with you." Ahalyā recognised Indra but consented to his proposal out of curiosity. When she was fully satisfied she said, "I am now fully satisfied, so please go away quickly and protect yourself, as well as me, from

²⁹ We may well compare here Westermarck's remark according to which jealousy of male is one of the most important reason for the guarding the chastity of females. Cf. E. Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, Vol. I, p. 317.

³⁰ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakaṇḍa, 84.

Gautama.” Indra in the haste of going away encountered sage Gautama returning from his daily bath and his face was darkened at the sight of the refulgent one. Gautama also detected the crime committed by Indra by the power of his austerities and cursed him, so that Indra became impotent. The sage cursed his wife also saying, “You will lie here in this forest on a bed of ashes, unseen by anybody, living on air without food and should perform severe austerities. When Rāma, the son of Daśaratha will visit the forest you will be purified and by paying him homage as a guest you will regain your own body.” So saying that great sage went away to continue his severe austerities.

Here adultery is committed by the woman willingly and hence not only the offending male but the woman also is punished severely by the offended husband. Thus fidelity of the woman during wedlock had already become the husband’s privilege.

The episode of Jamadagni and Reṇukā as narrated in the *Mahābhārata*³¹ represents the ideal of married fidelity evolved to its extreme stage. Sage Jamadagni’s wife Reṇukā once went for a bath where she saw king Sahastrārjuna dallying in the water with his numerous wives like an elephant in rut. A desire arose in her pious mind at this sight and she stood there dreaming that she was in the position of the queen. Soon however, she brought herself to reality and went away to the hermitage, sad at what she had seen and thought. Jamadagni was omniscient. He knew her thoughts, and he was so enraged that as soon as Reṇukā came back he ordered his eldest son to cut off her head. The son hesitated to behead his own mother. So the sage asked the second son but he too shrank from such a ghastly act. Finally it was his third and youngest son Paraśurāma who took his axe and slew his mother at his father’s command. Jamadagni was very much pleased with the obedience shown by Paraśurāma and conferred upon him a boon. Paraśurāma asked his father to revive his mother.

Here the punishment is so severe for a slight mental lapse, that bearing in mind the atmosphere of the Epics, it appears almost unbelievable that such a story, with the implication of a strict code of sex-morals would be found in one of them. The episode has as its objective, the true nature of son’s obedience to his father, rather than a tirade against adultery. At any rate the legend serves as

³¹ Mbh., III, 116.

indicative of the last step of evolution of sex morals where not merely physical adultery is a crime, but fidelity being an essential virtue of the wife, even a mental hesitation of a wife was nothing short of adultery and was to be punished as severely as adultery itself.

The epic attitude to adultery as revealed in the episode of Renukā becomes intelligible in the context of the emergence of the new ideal of Fidelity in marriage. Thus the sage Dīrghatamas puts a final limit (*maryādā*) to sex relationship, binding women to one man not only during the wedlock period but advocates complete chastity also before wedlock as also after, in case she becomes a widow and in another life also.

The critical edition of the Mahābhārata drops this part of the Dīrghatamas story and hence much reliance cannot be placed for general conclusions about sex-ethics in the Epics on this passage. The story however is given in Brhaddevatā³² and hence it cannot be just discarded as useless. But what is equally perplexing is the fact that there are two reasons for Dīrghatama to pronounce this *maryādā*. It is told that he cohabited in public in the manner of animals and the sages were enraged with him for his behaviour. Secondly, he was hated by his wife Pradveśī, because he did not earn and maintain her and the family. His wife, once in a rage threw him in the ocean. At this time the sage pronounced the *maryādā*. "A woman shall have one husband till she lives. Whether he be dead or alive, she shall have no other man. If she goes to another man, she sinks without any doubt."³³ Whether the *maryādā* refers to a check as previously introduced by Śvetaketu on the general free sex relationship, supposed to have been prevailing or it may be a sort of curse upon his wife that she may not be able to take another husband. This however can definitely be said that chastity not only during the lifetime of the husband, but even after his death became a norm in the Hindu society.

This restriction thus sets a new standard of sex ethics. Woman is fettered to one man only, from the cradle to the grave. On the other hand there is no reference to any such moral binding for the man, who has enough freedom granted to him through privileges

³² Brhaddevata 4, 11, 5.

³³ Mbh., I, 104, 34-36 (Bom. Ed.) Critical Ed. App. I. Note No. 56 (Adi-parva).

pertaining to sex life for instance, polygyny and remarriage.

The episode, besides indicative of a new standard of sex ethics throws an important light on the economic aspect of the institution of marriage. Only that husband, who could maintain and protect his wife could expect absolute conjugal fidelity from her. This episode itself reflects the attitude of Dīrghatamas' wife towards her blind and aged husband. She openly declares that she is not ready to tolerate a disabled husband any more. Elsewhere in Mahābhārata the wife of the holy Atri is shown running away from him saying, "I will no longer be subject in any way to this *Muni*."³⁴ King Janaka is also upbraided by his wife for becoming a monk and forgetting his duty as a husband. Cīrakārika's observation : "A man is called *Bhartā* because he maintains his wife and a *Pati* because he protects her. But when a husband does neither he is no more a husband"³⁵ confirms the economic obligations of marriage. In view of this, the rule advocating complete subjugation of women, was more an expression of frustration of the discarded husband and an unsatisfied wife may very readily revolt and in fact did. Unfortunately in course of time it became the ideal, when it was strengthened by another concept *Pāṭivratya*.

It was supposed to be a privilege of a wife to be sexually satisfied by her husband on the fourth day of menstruation. In case the husband failed to fulfil his obligation, it was open to the wife to satisfy herself even by approaching any other man. The Ādiparva³⁶ narrates the story of Uttuṅka, the faithful disciple. In the absence of his preceptor, the preceptors' wife approached him when her *ṛtu* appeared, as advised by other women of the hermitage. Uttuṅka, of course, refused cohabitation in keeping with the later standard of ethics.

But the very fact that Uttuṅka is approached clearly indicates that there was nothing wrong if a woman approached a stranger for sex-relation if the husband is unable to do so, either owing to his absence or any other reason. The reason for this is, intercourse on the fourth day of the menstrual period was supposed to fructify in progeny and the Aryan sages never conceived that this period

³⁴ Mbh., XIII, 14, 95 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁵ Mbh., XII, 258, 35.

³⁶ Mbh., I, 3. The whole episode is narrated elsewhere in this work in detail.

should pass without bearing its fruit. It is therefore not the privilege of the woman to satisfy her sex-impulse that is in view in such passages, but the passion of the Aryan sages to get the highest number of children. This is born out of lamentation of the wife of a sage that since her husband sits motionless like a stone always immersed in austerities, she will have no children and she wondered as to which region she will go after her death.³⁷ As referred to elsewhere, even unmarried girls had the option to satisfy their desire at the time of *ritu*. That was considered within the bounds of *dharma*.

When we come to the didactic portions of the Epics, adultery is however already recognised as a moral breach and is listed as a sinful act. Dirghatamas' statute which declared sexual relations outside the wedlock a sin, comes into full force here, and there is no chapter on religious discourse in the great Epic that does not refer to adultery as a breach of *dharma* and condemn it as a sin. The famous chapter of the Śāntiparva³⁸ describing various actions of merits and demerits starts the enumeration of demerits with adultery, thus giving it a first place among the sinful acts. The various *dharmaśūtras* and *smṛtis* also classify adultery as a *pātaka* or a sin.³⁹ Mahābhārata in the true puranic fashion introduces adulterous relation of a person as a sin and abstinence from it as a moral virtue offering heaven as the reward for the religious merit thus obtained. The merit thus acquired is sometimes compared with the performance of religious rite as when Anuśāsana Parva declares "A person who is always steadfast to his wedded wife pleases Vāsava by his behaviour and obtains the merit of performing an *Agniśtoma*."⁴⁰ The Anuśāsana Parva further declares, "In all castes a man must never approach the wife of another for there is naught in the world which so shortens the life of a man like a visit to the wife of another."⁴¹ Such passages appear in dozens and are scattered throughout the bulk of the Epic⁴² and everyone of them has the same moral tone.

³⁷ Mbh., XIV, 20, 3-4 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁸ Mbh., XII, 34.

³⁹ Cf. Manu, II, 59-61 who classifies adultery as a minor *pātaka*.

⁴⁰ Mbh., XIII, 107, 10 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴¹ Mbh., XIII, 104, 20 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴² Quoting as illustration, the 104th Chapter of Anuśāsana Parva has so many references to adultery—verses 12, 20, 21, 22; 108, 116-117; 132; 140. This shows the frequency with which injunctions about adultery are repeated.

Being regarded as a sin, adultery is necessarily depicted as an act, the indulgence in which results in accumulation of bad merit on the part of the adulterer and just as the Epics stamp it as a sin in so many places in so many words, so do they proclaim various punishments that the man receives. After death he either goes to hell or is reborn in a lower *yonī* according to the law of *karma*.

Thus it says. "For as many years as there are pores on a woman's body, he having conjugal relations with another's wife will be confined to hell."⁴³ "Men, who give themselves to promiscuous intercourse have a short life, go to hell and are reborn impotent."⁴⁴ This is not all. Sometimes to expiate their sin, they have to be born in lower *yonī* or *yonis* than that of a human being successively. "He that touches another's wife is born as a wolf, as a dog or as a jackal, then he is born as a vulture, a snake, a heron, as also a crane."⁴⁵

And of course, for those who do not commit the crime of adultery there is reward in the other world in the form of heaven. "The men who find delight only in their own wife and ever act towards other women as they do towards their mother, their sister, and their daughter, they whose eyes through good ways of life are shut to strange women even in thought, even when women approach them in secret lovingly—such men obtain heaven."⁴⁶ "He who in other things is pious and is content with his own wife and does not even in thought covet another woman, wins a glorious lot in the other world and earns the same merit even as one that offers a thousand horse sacrifices."⁴⁷

It seems that there are special regions in heaven reserved for such pious people who never indulge in adultery. Thus lamenting the death of her dear son Abhimanyu, Subhadrā says:—"O thou my little son, go to the same place whither come through their chastity the *munis* obeying strict vows and whither come the men, with but one wife."⁴⁸

⁴³ Mbh., XIII, 104, 22. (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁴ Mbh., XIII, 104, 13. (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁵ Mbh., XIII, 145, 53. (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁶ Mbh., XIII, 144, 10, 15. (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁷ Mbh., XIII, 107, 10 ff. (Bom. Ed.) Cf. XII, 165, 43.

⁴⁸ This may also refer to monogamous marriage, but here it is interpreted as a man devoted to one woman because it is bracketed with *munis* observing strict vows of *brahmacharya* and hence emphasis on sex morals is obvious.

Besides introducing the positive check in the form of the fear of hell or birth in a lower *yoni* and a negative check in the form of a reward in the next world, further attempt was made to check adultery by social disapproval. A stigma is attached to the adulterer along with a punishment in the form of social ostracism. The Epic, declares : "For five offences indeed, there is no atonement; through them a man becomes outcaste, unworthy of intercourse with forefathers and gods and pious men, goes to hell and is roasted there like a fish and has to live there on matter, flesh and blood. These are the murder of a brahmin, cow slaying, intercourse with another's wife, atheism and living on a woman." Not only those who themselves committed adultery but those who assisted in its commitment were also participators in the sin. "He who seduces or touches another's wife or gets her for another goes to hell." Similarly a brothel keeper or a person who maintained himself by selling his wife were all equally blamable.⁴⁹ Śalya contemptuously refers to the land of Anṅa as a place where people maintain themselves by selling their wives and children.⁵⁰ Thus, a considerable social stigma was attached to the sin of adultery and it is probable that beside the religious fear of hell etc., in the other world, society itself must have punished such people by outcasting them and prohibiting all social intercourse with them. That social ostracism was not a false threat but a fact in actual practice is clear from the lists of the brahmins not to be invited for *śrādhha*, or for gifts, or the list of actions which bring on social degradation.⁵¹ In those days it is very probable that such offences were more effectively punished by society and the leaders of the priestly class were more powerful than the kings themselves.

After laying it down that adultery is a sin, the expiations for it are then prescribed by the Epic. The atonement for these sins range from a simple fast, or abstinence from sexual pleasure till a certain period, to voluntary death. Thus the *Sānti parva*⁵² places the sin of adultery and its expiation with the following sins. "That brahmin is a sinful man, who invites any other woman, than his own wife to his bed, who thinks any vaiśya or śūdra, to be

⁴⁹ Mbh., XIII, 130, 37-40 (Bom. Ed.)

⁵⁰ Mbh., VII, 23-61, (Bom. Ed.)

⁵¹ Mbh., XIII, 22, 23; 37, 8-9; 59, 17-18; 90, 5 ff.; 135, 17-19, etc. (Bom. Ed.)

⁵² Mbh., XII, 165, 28.

superior to him, and who places a man of any other caste than a brahmin on a higher seat and himself sits on a grass mat." Such an individual has to expiate his sin of one night by taking any vow and wandering over the earth for three years. Elsewhere adultery is described as a heinous sin and is put on par with brahmin-murder or violating the preceptor's bed. It is said, "One who burns a house, one who sells *śmā*, one who prepares bows and arrows, one who is an astrologer, one who betrays friends, one who is adulterous, one who cohabits with the preceptor's wife, one who harasses a man in misery like a crow pecking his beak on a wound, all these incur the sin of a brahmin-murder". Here the sin of adultery is made equal to that of a brahmin-murder and hence the atonement prescribed for brahmin murder is effective for it also. The difference that is seen in the degree of the one and the same sin committed by an individual seems to be due to the fact of *varṇa* distinction. In the first quotation given above the adulterer might be a brahmin and so the sin is light when committed by him while in the other he might be any common man. At another place in the Śāntiparva the atonement is comparatively light.⁵³ The *smṛti* convention also reflects the same state of affairs. This is apparent when various *prāyaścittas* on individual considerations are taken into account. Not only that, Manu who is otherwise a strict moralist goes to the extent of forgiving a person who has committed adultery for the first time, if he observes a fast for one day.

Nowhere in the Epics do we find any instance of an adulterous person boycotted by the society. Adultery was thus considered as a moral lapse only and was not made an offence or a serious moral crime. The sages are often described as seducers of charming girls and are still respected and worshipped as powerful ascetics. The fact relating to the mysterious births of sages and heroes is explained away by a proverb "Origin of seers, rivers, great families and sin—should not be looked into."⁵⁴ These incidents may perhaps belong to a more remote period of a time when sex behaviour was free and sex morals not so strict. The social stigma attached to the sin of adultery thus must have become a socially effective

⁵³ Mbh., XII, 35, 36 and 25. For various atonements of adultery refer XII, 36, 1 ff.

⁵⁴ Mbh., V, 35, 72, (Bom. Ed.)

weapon only by the time, the concept of *pāṭivratya* must have been established.

Adultery with certain groups of individuals was particularly discouraged. The Anuśāsana parva⁵⁵ gives a list of such women: "The wife of a king, women on friendly terms, wife of a physician, wives of young people or old men, wife of a protegee and a related woman are all unapproachable." Another verse refers to women who are old, who belong to a family of low or unknown origin or a woman belonging to the highest *varṇa*. These women—married or unmarried were to be avoided for any type of conjugal relationship. There is no reason recorded as to why these women are specially mentioned to be avoided.

The Mahābhārata not only pronounces judgement on adulterous men but also on adulterous women. But in most of the cases the punishment indicated for a woman is light.⁵⁶ Usually she is considered pure after her monthly period because it is declared that menstruation removes all faults of a woman.⁵⁷

A woman who falls into the practice of going astray is punished by her husband by a declamation and by her being lodged in a separate place with a small allowance.⁵⁸ It should be noted that though in theory women were allowed to escape lightly, all such women who committed such offences and were caught red-handed must not have escaped so lightly. The Epic legends narrated above clearly indicate that the woman was often enough severely punished by the husband concerned. Śānti-parva however, at one place declares, "An unmarried girl who desires an intercourse with a man incurs one third of the sin of brahmin-murder, while the man who cohabits with her the rest of it,"⁵⁹ thereby suggesting that if a woman leads a person to sin she shares the bad results with him.

The whole force of argument for considering adultery as a moral breach was raised one step higher when even mental slackness regarding this matter is declared as a sin. The Śānti parva⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Mbh., XIII, 104, 116-117, 132, 140, (Bom. Ed.)

⁵⁶ The Indian Penal Code also does not make the offence of adultery punishable for women.

⁵⁷ Mbh., XII, 35, 29.

⁵⁸ Yājñavalkya, I, 70; Gautama, XXII, 35; also Mbh., XII, 36, 27.

⁵⁹ Mbh., XII, 165, 42.

⁶⁰ Mbh., XII, 193, 17.

declares, "A man should not see a rising sun, a naked strange woman and should cohabit with his wife only when she is in her *ṛtu*. The evil doer who looks with sinful eyes upon a naked woman is born again as a weakling and he that looks on his neighbour's wife with impure eyes comes in the world blind, as a fruit of his wickedness." Here we see that even though the actual crime is not committed, mental slackness itself is regarded as a crime and is to be forthwith expiated. It seems that with the rise of the ideal of fidelity, when the sexual life of woman came to be restricted to her husband, naturally people were discouraged from having any relationship with her or even looking at her. That this ideal was maintained is seen from the speech of Hanumāna. Hanumāna in search of Sītā, enters Rāvaṇa's harem where he sees numerous women lying in deep sleep in various postures. He tries to find out if Sītā is there and begins to look into the faces of every woman to find out if Sītā were to be there. Soon however he remembers; "My looking at another's wives in this sleeping condition will lead to a lapse in *dharma*." Thus grieving in his mind, he bent upon achieving his end, decided again, "I have seen all the women secluded in Rāvaṇa's harem but my mind has not been blemished in any way. Mind is the instigator to all senses and mine is steady, in good as well as bad occasions. Moreover I would not be able to find out the daughter of the Videha king in any other place because women are seen amongst women. A creature seeks the refuge of that creature to whose sex it belongs. A lost woman is not to be found amongst deers. That is why I have searched Rāvaṇa's harem with a clean mind but could not find Jānakī."⁶¹

Here Hanumāna is not observed by anybody inspecting Rāvaṇa's harem. So there is no worry as regards public censure. Neither did the *rāksasa* possess a moral standard similar to that of the Aryans but still he becomes conscious of the moral breach he was committing and argues out as above to satisfy his own conscience. Moreover it is to be noted that Hanumāna himself did not belong to the Aryan community but was a *Vānara*. Anyway the whole speech reflects the view of the Epic writer in respect of one's attitude towards women other than one's own wife.

When even a *Vānara* behaves in such a saintly manner, it is no wonder that Vālmiki makes Lakṣmaṇa—the idol of duty and

⁶¹ Rāmāyaṇa, Sundarakāṇḍa, 12, 40-45.

brotherly affection to behave in an even more highborn manner. Thus when the ornaments thrown by Sītā, along the route she was carried away for the identification of that route are shown to him by Rāma and Sugrīva for identification, Vālmiki makes Lakṣmaṇa to answer most poetically: "Neither do I recognise the head ornament (*Keyuras*) nor the earrings (*Kundalas*). I only recognise the anklets (*Nupuras*) because I daily bowed in her feet."⁶² Astonishing as Lakṣmaṇa's reply is, that after all his protracted stay with Rāma and Sītā and his offering of personal service to them, he could not recognise the ornaments daily used by Sītā, it represents a truly Aryan ideal—not to look at another man's wife—especially elder brother's wife, who was to be like one's mother.

Even the voluntary shedding of the seed was also a moral breach though not a serious one and was to be atoned for.

"A celibate does not fall from his vow by accidental discharge of his semen in dream. Even then he should atone for it in the morning after taking his bath and performing *sandhyā* by an oblation of purified butter in the fire."⁶³

This atonement is perhaps added only to perfect the list of moral breaches to be atoned for. In the numerous incidents that we come across in the Mahābhārata describing cases of various sages ejaculating their semen at the sight of beautiful damsels or *apsarās*, nowhere do we find the mention of an atonement. On the contrary, the seed being that of a very mighty king or refulgent sage never goes waste, is reared somehow and a great sage, a strong hero and sometimes a very beautiful maiden is born out of it. The persons thus born are held in high esteem for their qualities, irrespective of their mysterious births. The height of chastity is reached by Nakula, the hero beautiful "most worthy of gaze in all the world who goes off to banishment plastered with dust all over the body as he does not wish to turn the women's heads on the way."⁶⁴

A peculiar fact to be noted about the sin of adultery is that though considered as a social and moral breach of behaviour, law had no punishment for it. All the expiations were to be carried on individual initiative and a person refusing such expiation could not

⁶² Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, 6, 22.

⁶³ Mbh., XII, 35, 26, (Bom. Ed.)

⁶⁴ Mbh., II, 71, 17.

be punished in any other way except by exclusion from the *varṇa*. A later *Smṛti* however, suggests that the king should appoint a tribunal to look into the matter if a person refused to offer a *prāyaścitta* (Viṣṇu V, 18).

Adultery however, is a crime recognised by the state when considered particularly from the inter-relation of the *varṇas*. Adulterous intercourse of a person of a lower *varṇa* with a woman of higher *varṇa* is considered an offence liable to be punished by capital punishment. The Śāntiparva declares, "whichever woman abandons the nobler bed and seeks an inferior one, the king shall cause her to be torn to pieces by dogs in open places.⁶⁴ Her paramour also had to suffer a severe punishment at the hands of the king which amounted to death.

The word "Superior bed" is not very clear but Nīlakaṇṭha elucidates it as that of a brahmin. The *Smṛti* tradition lends support to the view that the severe punishment prescribed above, especially for a woman who usually escapes punishment for adultery is specially laid down with an eye upon the transgression of *varṇa* rules and not for breach of morals. This is clear from Manu who classifies the punishment for adultery, firstly, according to the *varṇa* of the woman concerned in relation to the man, and secondly, by the consideration whether the woman is protected or not. Manu prescribes the following punishment for keeping illicit sex relations with a brahmin woman. "If a *vaiśya* or a *śūdra* cohabits with a protected brahmin woman they are to be punished just as a *śūdra* (is punished for doing so)".⁶⁵ The punishment seems to be burning alive dressed in *kaṭa* grass. A *vaiśya* is similarly punished if he would cohabit with a protected woman. While a *śūdra* is severely punished for carrying on illicit connections with any woman of the twice born castes.⁶⁶ Manu prescribes graded punishment for the adulterous relations between the man of a *dvija* class and a woman of a *varṇa* higher to him and most of the *Smṛti* writers follow suit.⁶⁷ The Mahābhārata however, condemns all *pratiloma* relations (viz. that of a *kṣatriya* woman with a

⁶⁴ Mbh., XII, 169, 64; cf. Manu, VIII, 371 ff.

⁶⁵ Manu, VIII, 377.

⁶⁶ Manu, VIII, 374.

⁶⁷ Cf. Manu, VIII, 374-385; Yājñavalkya, II, 286-88. Gautama, XXIII, 14-15; Viṣṇu, V, 40-41.

vaiśya or *śūdra* male and of a *vaiśya* woman with a *śūdra* male) with equally severe punishment. The *Smṛti* writers usually prescribe a higher punishment or fine for a member of a higher *varṇa* in their treatment of crime of theft, they however, prescribe a lighter punishment for a male offender of a higher *varṇa* in case of adultery. This clearly indicates that adultery was considered both a sin and a crime, not so much from the point of view of violation of sex morals or breach of the marriage vow as disturbing the *varṇa* hierarchy. This strengthening of *varṇa* hatred is evident when a later writer Viṣṇu goes further and condemns even adulterous relation with a woman of the lowest caste (*anuloma*) in the same terms as *pratiloma* connections. "He who had connection with a woman of one of the lowest castes should be put to death." According to older *Smṛti* writers like Manu and Yājñavalkya the fine for illegitimate intercourse with a *śūdra* woman was minimum.⁶⁸ Moreover if the intercourse was carried out with consent then there was no fine. Manu lays down "A maiden worshipping a superior person should not be punished."⁶⁹ Both Manu and Yājñavalkya prescribe a small fine for illegitimate intercourse with a *śūdra* woman.

It is therefore very natural that in the Epics adultery is absent as a punishable offence in the list of kingly duties while it heads the lists of sins.

The position allocated to the son secretly born out of adulterous relations (*guḍhaja*) amongst the first six types of sons who could inherit their parental property goes to show with what disregard the result of the moral breach of marriage vows was looked upon. Such a son belonged legally to the husband of the woman. As Dr. Kapadia remarks, "It was the corrupted life of the community that was responsible for their existence. Vigorous struggle was launched against lust, seduction and adultery by the early *Śūtra* writers and Epic writers but this did not allow them to blind themselves to the questions of their products, who presented no mean difficulty."⁷⁰ This statement may be supported by the following reference from the early *Brāhmaṇa* literature. This literature is very much puritanical in its character, being purely

⁶⁸ Cf. Manu, VIII, 385.

⁶⁹ Manu, VIII, 365.

⁷⁰ K. M. Kapadia, Hindu Kinship, p. 116.

priestly as opposed to the Epic which certainly shows the impact of society as a whole.

References regarding loose sex relationship outside wedlock in the Brahmanic literature have already been noted in the beginning of the chapter. Such conditions like hetairism must have exercised an unfavourable influence on the purity of the race and must have rendered illusory the through pedigrees which were essential for ancestor worship and other ritualistic purposes. That the society was aware of this is evident from the remark, "Inconsistent are the ways of women. Of whomsoever (as father) I shall call myself the son before both Gods and men as witnesses, his son I shall be, and those whom I shall name as (my) sons they will be my sons."⁷¹ Thus the acceptance of sons born out of wedlock became a necessity.

An attempt however, was made in ancient times to provide against this state of loose sex morality in which a son born out of wedlock was considered as belonging to the woman's husband. Begetting of the son of the body is regarded even in the R̥gveda as necessary for the preservation of the race.⁷² A proof of this is afforded by an ancient *gāthā* quoted in Āpstamba⁷³ and Baudhāyana⁷⁴ which is taken from a dialogue between Apūjagñi a teacher of the white Yajurveda and the mythical king Janaka. "Now I am jealous of my wife, O ! Janaka though not before, for in Yama's abode the son is awarded to him who begets him. The begetter leads the son after death into the dwelling place of Yama. Therefore they protect their wives carefully, who dread the seed of strangers. Watch jealously this propagation of race. Let no stranger seed fall on your field. When he passes into the other world the son belongs to him who begets him, it is in vain that the husband accomplishes this perpetuation of his race." Some similar sentiment is recorded by Manu who declares "A person who desires a long life, is intelligent and modest, should never sow his seed in the womb of another man's wife."⁷⁵ One fact emerges out clear from these passages. As time went on a growing repugnance towards the sons not born of wedlock is clearly felt and the legi-

⁷¹ Nidāna Sūtra, III, 8.

⁷² R̥gveda, I, 3, 1-3; VII, 4, 7.

⁷³ Āpstamba, II, 13, 7.

⁷⁴ Baudhāyana, II, 3, 34.

⁷⁵ Manu, IX, 41.

timate son is more and more emphasised as the important son.

Secondly by exaggerating the picture of frivolity of women specially with regards to sex, an indirect hint to keep a strict vigilance over women is given. The Epic abounds in passages of this type ; they have been already quoted elsewhere.

To resume, it seems that there was not a very strict code of sex morals for a married woman. Punishment of adultery is made an individual's concern, being left to the choice of the aggrieved husband. It is only when adultery is considered from the point of view of *varṇa* that it is considered legally punishable. Though a growing note of dissatisfaction against the looseness of sex-relations is recorded in the various slogans proclaimed against adultery, their very frequency may be said to indicate the looseness of sex morality in the society.

One of the probable reasons for the changed attitude towards adultery appears to me to be the emergence of the ideal of *Pativratya* which advocated fidelity to the husband not only physically but even mentally. The husband was to be the first and last thing in a woman's life. And the Epic writer preaches maxims like : "The husband is the only relative, the only religion and the only strength of a woman. The husband is a real god on this earth."⁷⁶

Once the maxim of considering the husband as a god on this earth was established it then necessarily followed that he should be paid as much respect as heavenly gods. This naturally led to the virtues of obedience and selfless service of the husband, faithfulness to him being of course accepted as the highest virtue. In obeying the wishes of a husband there was not to reason why but simply to do and die. The only duty of a woman was to see her husband as a god, however deformed he may happen to be, or however bad a character he might have; and to bow to all his desires without questioning. For a woman who is attached to her husband the only religion is to follow her husband. Be he weak or unprotected, poor, blind or miserly, a woman who always follows him is really chaste (*pativratā*).⁷⁷

In support of these maxims there are sparkling illustrations in the Epics, of utter devotion and silent yet brave sufferings on the part

⁷⁶ Mbh., XIII, 146, 36, (Bom. Ed.); also cf. Rāmāyaṇa Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 61, 24.

⁷⁷ Mbh., XIII, 146, 44, (Bom. Ed.); Rāmāyaṇa-Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 117, 23-24.

of the wife because of some whim of the husband which she was supposed to satisfy.

The sage Jaratkāru is compelled into marriage by his forefathers but vows that he will marry a woman bearing a name like his own. After a long search he finds such a girl, a sister of the king of *Sarpas* who is readily offered to him. But before marrying her he lays down a condition. "You must never do or utter anything that would irritate me, otherwise I shall sever myself from you and no longer dwell in your heart." He was faithfully served by his wife and enjoyed all the luxury that the king of *Sarpas* could afford. But it so happened once that he went to sleep on the lap of his wife. Seeing the evening sun nearing the horizon, his wife was in a dilemma as to whether she should awaken him or not. If his sleep was disturbed he would curse her and on the other hand if being asleep he missed his evening prayers he would have been said lax in his brahmanic duty because of her not waking him. Finally she decided to wake him up taking the risk of curse so that her husband may be true to his *dharma*. The sage, as was expected, became extremely enraged. He left his wife who was weeping bitterly, not heeding her pleadings to stay. Thus the episode reflects how a wife is punished even for what is no fault of hers.

The wife had to do menial service for her husband. The very interesting and humorous episode which describes the invention of shoes and umbrella by *Sūrya* illustrates this point. On a certain occasion the short tempered sage Jamadagni was practising archery and his wife Reṇukā was collecting the arrows he shot. Scorched by the heat of the summer sun she rested a while under a tree, but afraid of her husband's wrath she returned almost at once. The sage was now angry at even the very short delay. Very meekly she explained that she rested a while under the shade of a tree, as the hot sun was scorching her head and the earth, her feet. The rage of the sage was at once turned into the direction of the sun who scorched his tender wife by his heat. *Sūrya* (the sun god) came down trembling and explained that heat was necessary to ripen the corn. But angry as he was, the sage would listen to no argument and threatened to displace the Sun from the sky. Then the sun god returned to heaven and brought down to earth a pair of sandals and one umbrella. He offered them as gifts to the sage saying, "Hence-forward whoever would use these, will never get scorched by my heat."

The voluntary blindness of Gāndhārī presents another type of sacrifice on the part of the wife. When Gāndhārī came to know that her would-be-husband is blind she at once folded a bandage over her eyes and denied herself the pleasure of sight.

The discourse between Satyabhāmā and Draupadī throws a very interesting light on the position of the woman in her husband's household. Satyabhāmā once went to see Draupadī, while she was in the forest and when they were both alone she asked her the secret of the sway she held over her husbands—the mightiest of the heroes. "What drug, what charm" she asked, "Do you use that conquers these unconquerable heroes?" And Draupadī's answer to the question was that obedience and selfless service were the charm and drug she used to conquer her husbands. ~~It was~~ by obeying their commands that she commanded them. She looked after the desires of the Pāṇḍavas, about all the details of the household. "I rise before they get up and sleep after they retire to bed. I eat after the last of my servants has taken dinner." Thus service was her winsome motto.⁷⁸ Similar is the reply given by Śāṇḍilī who, when asked how she gained heaven, replied, "I did not obtain divinity by putting on tawny garments or bark garments, neither by shaving my head or keeping matted hair. But I obtained it by pleasing my husband and serving my family".⁷⁹ The passage not only stresses the place of honour of the wifely duties, but seems to hint against women taking to asceticism if they willed so. Incidentally females taking to asceticism seems to be due to the influence of Buddhism.

This expectation of utter devotion on the part of women is carried to such an extreme that women were to obey husband's unrighteous orders also. Thus at one place it is said "This is what the good call the oldest law. What the husband orders to the wife to do, whether it be right or it be wrong, she must act exactly as he wills; thus do the knowers of the holy knowledge say."⁸⁰ This was perhaps because the husband was accepted as being everything to a woman.

It was under the influence of these maxims that Citrāṅgadā when she came to know that both her husband as well as her son

⁷⁸ Mbh., III, 222 ff.

⁷⁹ Mbh., XIII, 123, 8, (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁰ Mbh., I, 122, 27-28; also Cf. XIII, 142, 57-58, (Bom. Ed.)

were dead, became ready to lose her son but not her husband and wished to see him called back to life: "For this friendship has been made everlasting and imperishable by the creator."⁸¹

Obedience to husband thus becomes an essential attribute of a chaste woman along with marital faithfulness. Sītā is the brightest gem amongst the several Indian *satis*, Sāvitrī, Damayantī and many others besides, whose life stories are known even to teenagers in India. There are many other shining examples of *satis*.⁸²

The same attachment to the ideal of faithfulness is seen in the story of Sukanyā, a princess married to an old, blind *ṛṣi*. Even when enticed by the beautiful gods Aśvinikumāras she still remained firm. Not only that, she recognised her husband whom the Aśvinikumāras gave their own form, from the trio before her.⁸³ Equally noteworthy is the faithfulness of the daughter of king Śrījaya, married to the monkey faced Nārada, who was cursed by his cousin Parvata to become so, in his rivalry for the love of this very girl.⁸⁴ She remained faithful to her monkey faced husband. When the curse was over and Nārada regained his original form, she refused to accept him as her husband taking him to be some other person.

This was one of the most difficult of the ideals to live up to and the hard life that women had to undergo to achieve this ideal was fully appreciated by the sages of those times. In the course of a dialogue between the sage Mārkaṇḍeya and king Yudhiṣṭhira, the king praised the chaste women as follows: "All persons of standing must be given honour and especially those women who know only one man. The obedience of the faithful wives seems to me a hard thing to achieve. Do thou, my Lord, set forth to us the high dignity of a restraint in the heart and never bethink themselves of their husband as of god. O Lord, thou glorious one, this seems to me a heavy task. Women, O twice born one, are obedient to both, father and husband. Compared with the awe-inspiring duty and

⁸¹ Mbh., XIV, 80, 15, (Bom. Ed.)

⁸² The Hindu women upto the present day are in the habit of reciting the names of the various epic women considered as model of chastity. They are as follows in the order of precedence—they are Sītā, Draupadī, Tārā, Ahalyā and Mandodarī. One wonders how Ahalyā guilty of adultery and Tārā who actually remarried could be included in a list of chaste and devoted women.

⁸³ Mbh., III, 122 ff.

⁸⁴ Mbh., XII, 29.

virtue of women, there is indeed, so far as I can see, none other whatsoever that is more burdensome. For, it is with virtuous ways and constant attention that women have their work to do. Truly, they have a heavy task towards father and mother; and the women too who know only one husband and who speak the truth and who carry the foetus in their body for ten months and so live by the side of death—what could there be that is more wonderful !”⁸⁵

Not only is the faithful woman respected and glorified but it was also believed that this chastity was a sort of penance through which she acquired religious merit and a power which placed her above ascetics who performed severe austerities. Thus it is said : “The chastity and goodness of a woman bring all knowledge. It has power over life and death, heaven and hell.” In the *Rāmāyaṇa* is also described the glory of chastity, in simple and beautiful language : “The tears of faithful wives do not fall to earth in vain.” A faithful wife is equated to a place of pilgrimage (*tīrtha*). The sage Mārkaṇḍeya glorifying a chaste woman narrates the episode of the power of a chaste brahmin woman. Once a brahmin named *Kauśika* became angry with a sparrow and burnt her by his wrath. Thereafter he went to the city for alms, as was his custom and waited at the door of a brahmin. The wife of the brahmin at whose door he was standing asked the ascetic to wait and went inside the house to bring alms for him. Just then her husband came home tired and hungry. The lady hurried to give him water to wash his hands and feet and to serve him food. After he was satisfied and went to sleep, she approached the ascetic waiting outside with alms. The ascetic was of course enraged at this behaviour of hers and cast angry looks at her. The woman thereupon at once told the ascetic that she was not a sparrow to be burnt by the fire of his anger. Surprised at hearing this, the ascetic enquired of her how she came to know of the incident in the forest. She replied that it was through the power of her *satitva* and advised him to go to a particular Dharmavyādha for proper understanding of *dharma*. Thus it was implied that the chaste wife could get a mysterious power of omniscience also. Furthermore *Sāvitrī* could challenge even the god of death,⁸⁶ and *Bhadrā* could procure children by lying besides the corpse of her husband. Similar was the power of

⁸⁵ Mbh., III, 196, 2-5.

⁸⁶ Mbh., III, 277 ff.

the wife of king Paṇḍya whom impure persons could not see. It was due to the power of chastity that Sītā kept *rāksasa* Rāvaṇa away from her in the Aśoka grove and cool the fire on Hanumāna's tail. Thus the virtue of chastity endowed many superhuman powers in women.

But, above all, it is of course in the life beyond that the faithful wife is rewarded. "Far away beyond the heaven of those that are absorbed in holy meditation lies the abode of the faithful wives, beyond that lies only the domain of the ultimate being." Nor is that all. She is able to lead her husband to heaven due to the power of her chastity.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Mbh., III, 197, 20.

CHAPTER V

POST WEDLOCK SEX-MORALS

Hindu marriage is a sacrament. It is binding to both the parties during their life time, as well as after the death of one of the parties. But in reality this later aspect of Hindu marriage has been valid only so far as women are concerned. The man is not only allowed to remarry after the death of his wife, but is allowed to take a second wife even during the life time of the first. On the other hand, the sex-life of a woman is restricted to only one person, namely her husband, not only during the wedlock, but even after the death of her husband. In a previous chapter the limitation set by Dīrghatamas has been referred to. This limitation is set down only for women, demanding of them complete fidelity to the husband, before as well as during and after the wedlock and indeed even after the death of the husband. The restriction on the sex-life of a widowed woman must have been gradual. The Epics reflect the evolution in four distinct stages, namely, the gradual prohibition of the custom of re-marriage of women; secondly, allowing the widow a limited sexual freedom after the death of the husband solely for the purpose of procreation as represented by the custom of *niyoga*; thirdly, the ideal of absolute fidelity to the dead husband, whereby the woman was expected to remain chaste and lead an ascetic life after the death of her husband; and fourthly, the immolation of the widow, according to the custom of *satī*. All these stages will be examined in order of their evolution.

The vedic tradition has nothing to object to the remarriage of a widow.¹ As the Atharvaveda (18,3,2) describes, the widow is made to lie on the funeral pyre of the dead husband. A man called *didhiṣu* lifts her up by taking hold of her hand and becomes her husband. The Aśvālayana sūtra adds that *didhiṣu* is a brother of the dead man. This brother, very probably, is the younger brother of the husband. This is evident from another passage in

¹ Vedic Index, Vol. I, pp. 476-77 (Rgveda, X, 188; Atharvaveda, XVIII 32) also Cf. P. V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstras, Vol. II, Chap. XIV; Baudhāyana, IV, 1, 16; Vasiṣṭha, XVII, 19, 20; 72-74.

the R̥gveda (10, 42, 2) which says: "Who brings you to bed, as a widow does her brother-in-law?" The re-marriage of the widow was not restricted within the family circle. A widow if she so chose could also marry an outsider. The Atharvaveda (IX, 5, 27-28) actually describes a charm for use by a remarried woman which would grant her union with the second husband in the next world.

Both these traditions regarding re-marriage, viz., that of taking over of the widow by the husband's brother and that of contracting marriage with an outsider are reflected in the Epics too. The remarriage of the widow with the brother of the deceased husband seems to be a regular tradition much frequently practiced, not only by the jungle tribes like *vānaras* etc., but also by royal Āryan families of ancient repute—none less than the *kuru* family of Hastināpura itself, round which the story of the Mahābhārata revolves.

When both the sons of king Śāntanu die childless leaving behind them young widows, Satyawatī requests her step-son Bhiṣma to marry them and protect the kingdom. She says, "Here are these two queens—the daughters of the king of Kāśī—young and beautiful, desirous of children. Beget children on them for the sake of our family and also for my sake and thus fulfil your duty. Marry them according to *dharma*. Also concentrate yourself as a king and rule the people. Do not destroy your ancestors".²

The words "make them your wives according to *dharma*" imply that Satyawatī expects Bhiṣma to marry his brother's widows and that action of Bhiṣma would be considered in accordance with *dharma* as the progeny was necessary to prevent ancestors from sinking to hell. Bhiṣma refuses to act according to Satyawatī's proposal not because the proposal is objectionable but because he wants to stick to his vow of celibacy.³

² Mbh., I, 97, 9-11.

³ Mbh., I, 97, 13. A reference may be made about the opinion of Prof. Holtzmann according to whom in the earlier version of the story of the Mahābhārata, Bhiṣma actually married the widows of his younger brother because he is often referred to as the grand-father by the Epic. This view is quoted by Dr. Winternitz, who supports it, in an article (J.R.A.S. 1897, p. 722). It is needless to point out here that in spite of the antiquity of the tradition of the remarriage of the widowed woman with a brother-in-law, Bhiṣma's marriage with his sisters-in-law is out of question. If that would have been the case Bhiṣma would have ascended the throne being the father

The above incident thus, perhaps represents an earliest tradition when the wives of a person could be not merely approached but married by his brothers after his death if he was childless. This tradition seems to be so much in vogue that it is often made the basis of a simile viz., "Just as in the absence of a husband a woman accepts her brother-in-law as a husband, similarly the earth accepts *ksatriyas* as her lord only in the absence of a brahmin."⁴ This early tradition is to be clearly distinguished from the later system of *niyoga* referred to in almost all *dharmasūtras* and *smṛtis* according to which a person could procreate one or more sons on the widow of his brother after the due permission of the elders. This is only a limited co-habitation while the above instance points to actual re-marriage. The difference is clear when we refer to Manu who allows one son to be procreated by *niyoga* and includes him in a list of *Dāyāda* (Manu, IX, 59, 64 ; IX, 159, 60) while in (IX, 143) he clearly censures the son of an unappointed widow or the son of a remarried widow and declares that they do not share their father's property (also Cf. Gautama, 28, 33).

As a contrast to this, the incident of Vālī and Rumā, Sugrīva's wife recorded in the Kiśkindhākāṇḍa of the Rāmāyaṇa marks a clear advance in the popular opinion about the elder brother-in-law marrying the younger brother's wife. The episode is thus narrated in the Rāmāyaṇa. After returning from his deadly duel with a *rākṣasa*, Vālī, the king of the *vānaras*, was much enraged when he saw that his younger brother Sugrīva had appropriated his kingdom along with his harem thinking him to be dead. He at once turned out Sugrīva, whose physical strength was inferior, out of the city and took possession of his wife Rumā.⁵ But this action of Vālī is disapproved by the Epic writer : firstly, because it is done even though the actual husband is still alive and secondly, because it is the elder brother who appropriates the wife of the younger brother. When Sugrīva meets Rāma his main complaint against Vālī is not the ill-treatment accorded to him by his brother but that his wife was captured by him.⁶ Rāma kills Vālī and when the latter asks

of Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the story of Mahābhārata would have been quite different.

⁴ Mbh., XII, 73, 12; XIII, 8, 22, (Bom. Ed.)

⁵ Rāmāyaṇa, Kiśkindhākāṇḍa, 10, 26.

⁶ Rāmāyaṇa, Kiśkindhākāṇḍa, 8, 33.

the cause of killing him, who is innocent, Rāma justifies his action of killing by saying, "Try to understand the reason why I killed you. You had transgressed the *dharma* by appropriating your younger brother's wife and by holding Rumā who is like a daughter-in-law to you with an evil desire. And this punishment is the result of your transgression".⁷

Here we see that Rāma makes out Vālī's appropriation of Rumā his main fault and kills him for that sin. This shows an advance in the idea of the relation between different family members. As compared to the older tradition according to which all brothers had a right to the wife of a dead brother, the right of the elder brother over younger brother's wife is curtailed. And to strengthen this curtailment the younger brother's wife is put on par with a daughter-in-law rendering thereby sex relation between them as an incest. The other limitation that is acknowledged is, that no relationship could be established between a woman and her brother-in-law, during the life time of her wedded husband. This is a clear advance of restriction on sex-ethics over one recorded in the case of Brhaspati and Mamatā.

An identical sentiment is echoed by apsarā Rambhā when she is molested by Rāvaṇa, while on her way to fulfil a love appointment with Kubera. She protests against Rāvaṇa's behaviour on the plea that Kubera was a younger brother of Rāvaṇa and hence like a son to him and she being his beloved was like a daughter-in-law to him. Therefore he should follow the path of good people.⁸ Rambhā being an apsarā and was not bound by any moral code, as they were approachable by anybody. Secondly, she was not actually married to Kubera to claim any relationship with Rāvaṇa. But since her motive was to satisfy Kubera on that particular night she puts forward this plea. Even in the Mahābhārata while discussing the problem of Draupadī's marriage with the five Pāṇḍava brothers, Draupadī's brother raises this argument against her polyandrous marriage, "How can a younger brother marry the wife of his elder brother?"⁹

While a person's approach to his younger sister-in-law was completely prohibited, relation of the elder brother's widow with

⁷ Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, 18, 18-20.

⁸ Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, 26, 30.

⁹ Mbh., I, 188, 10.

the younger brothers of the dead husband was still in vogue as illustrated by Tārā's remarriage with Sugrīva as recorded in the Rāmāyaṇa.¹⁰ The fact that this was not a tribal custom peculiar to the *vānaras*, is clear from the doubts that Sītā harbours about the faithful Lakṣmaṇa when the latter refuses to go in search of Rāma who had gone to kill the golden deer, leaving Sītā alone. Embittered by her helpless condition Sītā accuses Lakṣmaṇa saying : "O, Lakṣmaṇa though you are a brother and a friend, you are really our enemy because you do not follow your brother in this condition. You really want him to be killed only for my sake. Due to your greed for acquiring me, you do not go to help the son of Raghu. You really do not love him and that is why you stand motionless. You followed Rāma to this forest either for my sake or sent by Bharata. But neither you nor Bharata should have any hope because after having once accepted Rāma the lotus eyed as my husband, how can I think of any other husband ? As soon as I hear that Rāma is dead I will also die. I will not be able to live for a single moment without Rāma."¹¹ The Rāmopākhyāna of the Mahābhārata also echoes the same sentiment when Sītā in an even more aggressive tone rebukes Lakṣmaṇa, saying, "O, Foolish one, your desire will not be satisfied. I will kill myself with a weapon. I will jump from the peak of a mountain or enter a fire but just as a tigress does not succumb to a jackal so will I not submit to an insignificant person like you, leaving my own husband Rāma."¹²

These doubts expressed by Sita for a brother-in-law like Lakṣmaṇa who was so chaste that he had never taken a look at her indicate that the custom of the widow remarrying her husband's younger brother was more or less customary. That is why Rāma when he refuses to accept back Sītā as his wife when she returns from Rāvaṇa's imprisonment, himself tells her, "Thou art free to go wherever you like. You may make your choice either between Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa or Śatrughna, or even Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa. But looking to the noble family tradition I will not accept you."¹³

¹⁰ Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, 29, 3, 5.

¹¹ Rāmāyaṇa, Aranyakāṇḍa, 44, 5-8, 24-27.

¹² Mbh., III, 262, 26, 25.

¹³ Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, 115, 21-24. (It is very curious that Rāma who refuses to accept Sītā, points out his brothers as an alternative because all

Here it is clear that Sītā selecting any of her brothers-in-law as her husband was not against *dharma*. The first revolt that is recorded in the Epics against this popular tradition is Sītā's challenge to Lakṣmaṇa not to marry him but to be true to Rāma. This contrasts sharply with Tārā—wife of Vālī who after a lot of crying and lamenting for her deceased husband almost immediately accepts her happy fate in getting Sugrīva as her husband. Sītā is the popular ideal of the chaste woman and hence it is natural that the Epic writer, should echo the emerging sentiments of fidelity through Sītā. In threatening to die after her husband Sītā refers to a still later development of the fidelity ideal, viz., *sati*—voluntary immolation of the widow after her husband. Thus by the times of the final recensions of the Epic the popular custom of the *devar* marriage was also becoming objectionable.

Bhīṣma's hesitant view about the marriage of a widowed girl whose bride-price (*śulka*) is already paid viz.—that she should be married only if the marriage ceremony is not performed, not otherwise,—takes us a step further. While discussing the different situations in an *asura* type of marriage when the bride-price was already paid but the marriage could not be performed with the payer of the bride-price, Bhīṣma says to Yudhiṣṭhira "If a man who pays the bride-price for marriage dies, then the girl should be married to his younger brother, but if she does not wish to do so, she may perform penance desiring the dead husband in the next world. Some learned men say that this sort of action is only voluntary but (this statement) is not supported by the *śāstras*." Out of these two opinions Bhīṣma's conclusion is: "If the *pañigrahaṇa* ceremony is not yet performed and the bridegroom dies then the younger brother can marry the girl, but if some one tells a lie (i.e. even though the *pañigrahaṇa* ceremony was performed it is declared as not performed) then one incurs a sin.¹⁴ Thus the right of the younger brother to marry the wife of the deceased elder brother is restricted. He could marry only a girl betrothed to his brother and that too if she were willing.¹⁵

belonged to the same family and it is for the noble family tradition that he refuses Sītā. This shows the incongruity of the passage which can be regarded as a later interpolation).

¹⁴ Mbh., XIII, 44, 52-54, (Bom. Ed.)

¹⁵ Cf. Manu, IX, 97.

This perhaps points to the strong hold which the customs of remarriage with a brother-in-law held over the society. Bhiṣma thus tries to adjust the customary tradition of the widow's remarriage with the younger brother of the husband to the later concept of fidelity of not transgressing one's husband. Thus the girl was allowed to remarry to the younger brother of the deceased husband according to the old tradition but only if her marriage was not performed and consummated, thus renovating the old tradition with later moral ideals. It should be noted here that the practice of the younger brother-in-law marrying the widow of the elder brother is still practised in some castes in modern India.¹⁶

The only instance we have of an actual remarriage of a widow outside the family circle is that of Arjuna and Ulūpī.¹⁷ Arjuna during his visit to a holy place called Gaṅgādvāra entered the holy waters of the river Gaṅgā for a bath. On finishing his bath he found himself being pulled into the waters by Ulūpī, a daughter of the king of serpents called Kauravya. She said, "O king, I am Kauravya's daughter born in the family of Airāvata, Ulūpī by name. I was struck by passion for you when I saw you entering the Gaṅgā for your bath. So, accept me—struck by love for you and not related with any other person by the marriage bond; and please me."¹⁸ Arjuna married her and had a son Irāvan on her.

When the story of Ulūpī's marriage with Arjuna is repeated elsewhere in the Mahābhārata¹⁹ where the story of the birth of Irāvan, Ulūpī's son by Arjuna is narrated as follows, "When the husband of that Nagakanyā was killed by the great souled Garuda, she having no son became very sad and unhappy so the serpent king Airāvata got her re-married with Arjuna. Arjuna also accepted that daughter of the serpents who was struck with a passion for him. Thus this Irāvan was Arjuna's son and was born in another's field. Due to prejudice towards Pārtha, he was abandoned by his paternal cousins (*pitṛvya*) and was protected by his mother who brought him up in the serpent country."

Both these accounts narrated above differ in details. The first

¹⁶ K. P. Chattopadhyaya, "Levirate and Kinship in India," *Man*, Vol. 22, No. 25, p. 40.

¹⁷ *Mbh.*, I, 206.

¹⁸ *Mbh.*, I, 206, 20.

¹⁹ *Mbh.*, VI, 86, 6-9.

account which centres round the love of Ulūpī and Arjuna does not refer to any marriage taking place between Ulūpī and Arjuna. According to it Arjuna stays there only for a night and proceeds further in his wanderings on the very next morning. Moreover Ulūpī here clearly declares herself as a person with no other bond. According to this account the union between Ulūpī and Arjuna becomes simply an illicit union of a love-struck maiden of serpent tribe with the Pāṇḍava hero, which must have been quite prevalent in those days.

According to the other account Arjuna remarries Ulūpī who is a widow and the reason of the remarriage is that Ulūpī is childless. In spite of the fact that an actual remarriage takes place, Irāvan is introduced as Arjuna's son born in another field which again casts doubts on the marriage of Arjuna with Ulūpī. Another noteworthy factor is that Ulūpī brings up her son in her father's house. The Epic writer explains this fact by informing us that Irāvan was driven away by his paternal cousins, due to their jealousy towards Pārtha and as a result was brought up in his maternal grand-father's house. In any way it indicates that the jealousy of Irāvan's cousins was born due to Arjuna's encroachment upon the right of the paternal cousins to produce a son on Ulūpī, their brother's widow and hence their refusal to recognise the son born out of the union of an outsider with the woman of their family. Or it is very probable that the Epic writer may have substituted a probable explanation of the then absolute tradition of the matrilocal residence on the part of Arjuna's son. Again as contrasted to the first account that she is without any bonds Ulūpī is here specifically introduced as a widow and his son as born in another's field, perhaps hinting slightly towards the manner in which society looked upon such sons. Does this mean that in the account given in the Ādiparva Ulūpī refers to her then condition as without any tie, she being husbandless and childless or was it because she was afraid that if she declared herself as already married Arjuna would not accept her? Lastly, considering all these doubts, it is not possible to extract any specific information about the attitude of the Epic towards the problem of remarriage, on the basis of this account.

The pathetic story of Nala and Damyanti however provides us with a definite proof that a particular time to which episode of Nala-Damyanti belongs, the custom of remarriage was prevalent,

unhindered by any social objection.²⁰

In the long episode of king Nala narrated in the Vanaparva of the Mahābhārata,²¹ a certain king Nala had to retire to the forest with his wife Damyanti, as a result of his defeat in a game of dice with his brother Puṣkara. Due to the influence of the evil Kali, Nala suspects his chaste wife to have eaten alone, the food brought by him, after much trouble, and so he deserts her. After a long time and many trials Damyanti manages to reach her father's home. In the meantime, Nala in an encounter with a serpent loses his original beautiful form and becomes very ugly (Bāhuka). He accepts the position of a charioteer of a king Ṛtuparna by name. After reaching her father's house Damyanti finds out the whereabouts of Nala with the help of a brahmin messenger. But since Nala had lost his original form, she is not sure about his identity. She sends an invitation to king Ṛtuparna in whose service Nala was a charioteer, to check latter's identity. The invitation ran thus "Damyanti, daughter of king Bhīma is holding a svayamvara again, so all the kings and princes are hurrying in that direction. Counting the time from today the svayamvara will take place tomorrow. So, O, king, if you can reach there in that much time, start quickly from here. She will take another husband at sunrise tomorrow, because nobody knows whether the brave king Nala is alive or dead."²² Nala was conversant with a magical formula, the recitation of which could enable him to make the horse he was driving fly in the air. So Ṛtuparna sought Nala's help who took him to the Vidarbha country in twentyfour hours time, otherwise an impossible task for anybody else. But at the palace to his utter surprise Ṛtuparna did not see any sign of festivity. He met the Vidarbha king, keeping very wisely the purpose of his meeting a secret. Damyanti being aware of Nala's superhuman power to make horses fly, was convinced that Ṛtuparna's charioteer Bāhuka who had brought the chariot within twenty four hours to Vidarbha, and which in normal course would have taken much longer time, cannot be anyone else but Nala. Thereafter Damyanti made further tests which proved beyond doubt that Bāhuka was actually Nala, her lost husband.

²⁰ M. Winternitz, History of Indian Literature, Vol. I, p. 2, ascribes a high antiquity to these ballads of bygone kings.

²¹ Mbh., III, 49-78.

²² Mbh., III, 68, 21-23.

Then it became impossible for Nala to deny the fact and ultimately the long separated couple met to live happily everafter.

Here neither any remarriage actually takes place, nor is there any intention of remarriage on the part of Damyanti. The whole pretext of remarriage is just a device for finding out Nala. Yet the fact that the practice of remarriage was prevalent is a legitimate conclusion for the following reason. Firstly, Damyanti finds out this unique pretext for bringing Nala to her own country. If the custom had not been in vogue, or any blemish was attached to it, she would not have either thought of such a pretext nor dared to use it. Damyanti sent the message inviting Rtuparna to her *svayamvara* in the presence of her mother, who also did not take any objection to this device. Secondly, king Rtuparna who received this invitation, took it as very natural for Damyanti to remarry and was quite eager to present himself as a suitor of her hand. If no such custom was prevalent he would have suspected some deceit behind the message. He neither suspected anything nor did he hesitate in running, rather flying, to such a long distance for the hand of a woman marrying for the second time, which clearly goes to prove that no social censure was attached to such remarriages. Thirdly, Nala himself on hearing the news of Damyanti's so-called intention of remarriage reacts in the most natural way. On the first impulse he abhorred women, calling them frivolous and fickle but on second thought, he at once realised that his own fault in abandoning Damyanti alone in a dense forest was a more serious one and then addressing her as '*Tapasvini*' (one who follows her vows) he found fault with his own luck which had driven him to this condition. He found nothing unnatural or bad in Damyanti who was deprived of friends and frustrated on the disappearance of Nala, deciding to remarry.²³

This episode may well lead us to believe that though in the episode itself an actual remarriage did not take place yet it seems very probable that remarriage was a normal custom for abandoned women. It should be noted that in this episode Damyanti had two children by Nala. Secondly though we do not know exactly the period that elapsed between the separation of the two and their reunion, it could not have been more than a year or two. Within this period Damyanti had managed to reach her father's house

²³ Mbh., III, 69, 5-6.

with the help of her maternal aunt, at whose place she had served as a maid servant for a short while. The conclusion to which one is irresistibly driven is that during the Epic period a woman even with children can contract a second marriage, a year or two after the disappearance of her husband.

Even in the later *smṛtis* we find a woman taking a second husband under this and similar circumstances: "A husband is lost or dead, when he has become a religious ascetic, when he is impotent and when he has been expelled from the caste—these are the five legal necessities when a woman may be justified in taking another husband."²⁴ Furthermore it should be noted that all the *sūtra* writers prescribe a specific period as a waiting period before contracting another marriage. The time limit which is set up on a consideration of the caste of the woman concerned and on whether she has any issues or not, varies with different *sūtra* writers. This unequivocal permission by *sūtra* writers of second marriage after the prescribed absence of the husband testifies that Dāmyanti's idea of re-marriage was socially approved. This fact is corroborated by further evidence. A brahmin named Gautama unhesitatingly declared his wife as a remarried *śūdra* woman.²⁵ When he went to ask for gifts from the demon king Virupākṣa, to a question put by the latter, he answered "I was born in the middle country, but at present I stay in the country of Bhils. My wife is a *śūdra* woman and has remarried with me. What I tell you is the truth." In spite of this statement the demon king included him in the gathering of the learned brahmins and bestowed gifts on him. Yet it should be noticed that all the same the king remarked to himself, "This person is a brahmin only in name,"²⁶ thereby indicating that along with other things remarriage with a *śūdra* woman was considered a blemish in a brahmin. We can see here the distaste for marriage with a widow especially of a lower *varṇa*. The distaste for re-marriage with a widow is revealed fully in Duryodhana's remark when he says that he is as disinclined to enjoy the earth as a man is to marry a widow."²⁷ The stress on virginity as a necessary

²⁴ Nārada, XII, 97-101; also Cf. Gautama, XVIII, 15-17; Manu, IX, 76-78; Vāsiṣṭha, 75-80; Kautilya, II, 4.

²⁵ Mbh., XII, 165, 5.

²⁶ Mbh., XII, 165, 7.

²⁷ Mbh., IX, 31, 45, (Bom. Ed.)

qualification of a bride seems to have served as a check on the custom of the remarriage of women. With the great emphasis on the virgin bride, remarriage of a woman came to be considered a sin. This fact is confirmed by an oath of Arjuna when he vows the death of Jayadratha by the next sun-set. "May I be the recipient of that fate which befalls a person who marries a non-virgin."²⁸ In Manu this attitude is fully developed as reflected in his declaration that a girl can be given in marriage only once (thereby indicating that remarriage is not possible) and secondly that the marriage formulas are intended only for the maiden (i.e. the bride should be a virgin.)²⁹

The position that the son of a widow enjoyed in the society also throws an indirect light upon what the sentiment of the society was towards the remarriage of widows. Unfortunately, there being no actual instance of remarriage in the Epics, there is no data as regards the son of a widow technically known as *paunarbhava*, except those of the so-called didactic references, wherein lists of sons are given after the fashion of legal literature, and hence it is difficult to decide the actual position of a *paunarbhava* in the society. Incidentally, these lists too, name the sons somewhat differently from the *smṛtis*, yet the name of the *paunarbhava* occurs in one list³⁰ where he stands fourth in the line of succession after *svayamjāta*; *praṇita* and *parikṛita* (whom Kane interprets as equivalent of *aurasa*); *putrikāputra* and *kṣetraja* respectively. Comparing this list with that of Manu (IX, 158-160) it is seen that while the Epic places *paunarbhava* as fourth Manu places him much lower in the social scale viz. tenth and does not even consider him as an heir to his father's property, he being termed as *adāyāda*. The Epics thus preserve the older tradition even though Manu has given them a new turn. The didactic portion of the Mahābhārata however reflects a very bad opinion about the son of a remarried mother. Thus the *paunarbhava* is excluded from the lists of brahmins worthy to be invited at *śrāddha* or worthy to be given gifts.³¹ This should support the view that even by the time of the final compilation of

²⁸ Mbh., VII, 73,25, (Bom. Ed.)

²⁹ Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. VIII, p. 452.

³⁰ Another list is in Mbh., XIII, 49, 3-11, (Bom. Ed.) but *paunarbhava* is conspicuously absent in it.

³¹ Mbh., XIII, 90, 15, (Bom. Ed.)

the Epics, remarriage of widows was condemned, and the sons born out of such union censured by the society.

From this position of the son born of a remarried widow, along with the sentiments recorded above against the choice of a widow for bethrothal as compared to a virgin, one can easily trace the disfavour with which society looked upon the custom of remarriage as contrasted with the earlier position recorded in the episode of Nala and Damyanti where no such objection is reflected. The repugnance grew so strong later that the texts listing *kalivarjya* activities forbid remarriage of widows completely. Even a widow whose marriage is not consummated (*aksatayoni*) is denied the privilege³² to remarry;—a privilege granted by Manu who is strongly against granting even a limited sexual freedom to a widow in the form of the custom of *niyoga*.³³

The custom of *niyoga* perhaps served as a link between the gradual fading of the remarriage of widows and absolute chastity on the part of the widow. In a society conscious of the debts towards their ancestors—debts which could be paid only by procuring a son—the system of *niyoga* was a compromise where the widow remained faithful to her husband's memory but could have a son through some other agency when he was dead, or even during his lifetime, if he was in any way incapable.

The tradition of *niyoga* is very old and must have existed simultaneously with the custom of remarriage. Though traceable to the Vedic texts,³⁴ its specific mention is made by Gautama dharma-sūtra: "A woman whose husband is dead and who desires offspring, may secure a son through her brother-in-law. She should obtain the permission of the elders and have intercourse only during the *ṛtu*. She may obtain a son from a *sapinda*, a *sagotra*, *saprarava*, or a *savarna*."³⁵

In the Epics the custom of *niyoga* seems to be an old and popular one followed by many childless widows who wanted to remain faithful to their husband's memory. The Ādiparva of the Mahābhārata provides with two illustrations of *niyoga* both standing as types.

³² P. V. Kane, History of Dharmasāstras, Vol. III, p. 391.

³³ Manu, IX, 176.

³⁴ Cf. Rgveda, VII, 57, where a *ksetraja* son is preferred to an adopted son.

³⁵ P. V. Kane, History of Dharmasāstras, Vol. III, p. 597.

When Vicitravīrya died childless a crisis developed whereby not only the throne of Hastināpura became vacant, but there was also a danger of the extinction of the Kuru family, because the eldest son of King Śāntanu—Bhīṣma had vowed as a bride price for his step-mother neither to marry, nor to install himself on the throne. But the queen mother Satyawatī because of whom Bhīṣma had taken such a vow, herself approached him and requested him to get married with the young widows of his brother and also to take possession of the kingdom. But when Bhīṣma refused to accept the proposal on the ground of his vow to remain a life-long celibate, Satyawatī found out a new argument to convince her step-son. If it was not possible for him to get married with the widows of his brothers, then she said, he should accept them in *niyoga* and should beget children as an *āpaddharma*. By doing so he would not only be continuing the family line but also be observing *dharma* and the royal family would appreciate this act.³⁶ Satyawatī also pointed out that what she suggested was a sacred duty on the part of Bhīṣma because as the only kinsman of the family it was his duty to perpetuate the family line and please the family circle.

But Bhīṣma refused the proposal of *niyoga* also, on the ground that he was a *ksatriya* and a *ksatriya* should be true to his words.

But though unable to continue the line of his father as he was bound by a promise, he showed another alternative whereby his father's line may continue. He advised Satyawatī to invite some brahmin with high moral qualities to continue the line of his father and pay that brahmin fees for the job he performed.³⁷

The proposal of inviting a brahmin for the purpose of *niyoga* being new to Satyawatī, Bhīṣma tried to convince her by citing such incidents wherein this function was performed by brahmins in the past. In old days when Paraśurāma killed all the *ksatriyas* on the earth for twentyone times, the *ksatriya* women produced sons by cohabiting with brahmins and all these sons were called *ksatriyas* because when the *ksatriya* women approached the brahmins that was solely for begetting progeny and so the sons belonged to their mothers.³⁸ The second illustration he offers for convincing Satyawatī is as follows : The blind sage Dīrghatamas was thrown

³⁶ Mbh., I, 97, 20-22.

³⁷ Mbh., I, 99, 2.

³⁸ Mbh., I, 98, 15.

into the river by his sons—being old and blind. Floating down the river he was rescued by king Bali who requested him to beget a son on his wife Sudeśnā. But finding the sage old and blind, the queen instead of going to him herself, sent her nurse to him, and the sage produced eleven sons headed by Kakṣivān and ten others. The king saw the boys and asked the sage, “Are these my boys?”. The sage said: “No, they are mine. I have produced this Kakṣivān and others on a śūdra woman. On finding me blind and old, your queen Sudeśnā did not come to me.” On hearing this king Bali pacified the sage and sent his wife Sudeśnā to him. Having touched her body the sage said that she will obtain a son bright and truthful and thus Sudeśnā gave birth to a son called Anga.³⁹

Thus Bhiṣma tried to prove that in the old days great brahmins, knowers of *dharma* and full of strength had produced sons on *ksatriya* women. To Satyavatī the proposal was novel but finding no other way out of the impasse she agreed to Bhiṣma’s proposal saying: “Putting trust in you I believe what you say.”⁴⁰ And her quick mind at once found out solution in this direction. Disclosing to Bhiṣma the secret of the son called Dvaipāyana Vyāsa born to her before marriage, by the contact of sage Parāśara, she asked Bhiṣma to invite Vyāsa for procreation. Thus Vyāsa, a learned-brahmin as well as a brother-in-law to the wives of Vicitravīrya from the maternal side, would be, she thought, a most suitable person for the purpose.

Even when Vyāsa arrived as soon as remembered, Satyavatī put before him the proposal in the same tone, and said: “Ordinarily father and mother both together produce a son. Just as Bhiṣma is Vicitravīrya’s brother from the side of Śāntanu, so you are from my side. This Bhiṣma, to keep true the promise given by him to my father, does not want to procreate a son or to ascend the throne of Hastināpura. So you on appointment by Bhiṣma’s and my words, deserve to produce sons for the sake of your brother’s family. You who are able should produce sons befitting the family, on your younger brother’s wives, who are young and beautiful like the daughters of gods, and desirous of sons.”⁴¹

Vyāsa accepted the proposal. Nor was it all. In the reply he

³⁹Mbh., I, 98, 6-32.

⁴⁰Mbh., I, 99, 4.

⁴¹Mbh., I, 99, 28-35.

gave to the proposal, he himself indicates that the system of *niyoga* was an ancient one (*purātana*) and sanctioned by dharma.⁴² He then said that his younger brother's wives should undergo a penance for one year before cohabitation. But Satyavatī in her hurry to obtain an heir so as to rescue the state from being a kingless one, requested him to give them sons as soon as possible. Then said the sage: "They shall have to do with my present ugly appearance". Satyavatī agreed and the sage proceeded to do what he was requested to do. However as a result of those ugly looks one of the sons of the *niyoga* union, Dhītarāṣṭra was born blind, because his mother closed her eyes on seeing the ugly sage; Pāṇḍu the other son was born pale because his mother grew pale on seeing the ghostly appearance of the sage and the third time instead of going to him themselves they sent a maid servant from whom Vidura was born.⁴³

This is an ancient episode in the Mahābhārata. Bhiṣma has advised Satyavatī to invite a sage worthy of the family of the Kurus and as such Vyāsa is known to be a great sage by the proper choice. But Satyavatī selected Vyāsa not as a sage but as an elder brother of Vicitravīrya. The Mahābhārata, thus shows the transition that was coming about in the institution of *niyoga*.

The second instance is that of Kuntī and her cowife Mādri. Both of them together procured five sons for Pāṇḍu with the help of different gods. Pāṇḍu was disabled from begetting children by the curse of a sage. Grieved by his sonless state he requested his wife Kuntī to produce sons with the assistance of some one else. For persuasion he quoted Svāyambhuva Manu according to whom a childless man should arrange to get a son begotten for him by another one superior to him. Such a son gave religious merits and was considered the best.⁴⁴

Proceeding in support of his proposal Pāṇḍu quoted the case of a woman called Śaradaṇḍāyinī, who allowed by her elders, taking a

⁴² Mbh., I, 99, 36-38.

⁴³ Mbh., I, 100, 23-31. Vidura's case can very well be compared with that of Kakṣivān's and others produced by Dirghatamas. It should be noted that the maid servants thus sent were officially unappointed for *niyoga* and hence sons produced in them could not be called the son of the owner of the field. They belonged to the man who begot them. Thus Vidura is called the son of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyāna Vyāsa (I, 100, 27). Similarly Dirghatamas declares Kakṣivān and the rest as his own sons.

⁴⁴ Mbh., I, 111, 31.

bath after her *ṛtu*, went at the crossing of four roads, selected a learned brahmin and after offering oblations to fire, obtained three sons from him.⁴⁵ Pāṇḍu advised his wife saying, "You also, O Kuntī, procreate sons through some brahmin well advanced in penance".⁴⁶

Kuntī was shocked to hear such a proposal coming from none less than her own husband. She refused vehemently to come in sexual contact with a person other than her husband even in thought. He was the only person, she said, from whom she could have children and while adhering to this principle, even if they had to die she would be happy to attain heaven with her husband. The custom of *niyoga* is introduced by Pāṇḍu as duly sanctioned by *dharma* and approved of by the sages.⁴⁷ And ultimately he commended on the basis of his authority as a husband to the still unconvinced Kuntī that she must procreate children.⁴⁸ Besides the example of Saradaṇḍāyini he also cited other examples to convince Kuntī. Firstly king Saudasa appointed sage Vasiṣṭha who produced a son called Aśmaka on the king's wife Madayantī. Secondly, Pāṇḍu's own birth was due to the cohabitation of Vicitravīrya's wives with the sage Vyāsa.

Kuntī then unfolded the story of some boons given to her by sage Durvāsā because she had served the sage well, when she was still young and was staying with her father. According to the boon any god would be available to her for service by chanting some *mantras*. She suggests that she would use the services of the gods to beget sons. Pāṇḍu consented and after a purificatory bath she conceived three sons through the agency of the gods Dharma, Vāyu and Indra respectively, and on the request of her husband by teaching the magic chantations to Mādrī, her cowife, she enabled her also to produce a twin through the medium of Aśvinas.

The tradition of introducing brahmins as suitable agency for *niyoga* is peculiar to the Epics because all the *smṛtis* differ from this tradition. Even Manu whom Pāṇḍu quoted as an authority is not decided in his opinion about the system of *niyoga*. While in one place (IX,59) he allows a widow to raise one son from her brother-

⁴⁵ Mbh., I, 111, 33-35.

⁴⁶ Mbh., I, 111, 36.

⁴⁷ Mbh., I, 113, 3.

⁴⁸ Mbh., I, 113, 29-30.

in-law or *sapiṇḍa* at other places (V, 161-162; IX, 64-68) he strongly denounces the system of *niyoga* as improper. Manu belongs to the school of those *smṛti* writers, who approve the ideal of complete fidelity to one husband and disapprove any connection of the widow in the form of remarriage or *niyoga*. Due to the strong prevalence of custom, somehow Manu allows one son to be raised by a *sapiṇḍa* or brother-in-law, but it should be noted that there is no reference to a brahmin or anybody of a noble birth to be appointed for procreation. Other *smṛti* and *sūtra* writers also are of the same opinion as Gautama, as noted before.⁴⁹ Not only that but in some parts of the Mahābhārata itself, we meet with a protest against this tradition of handing over one's wife to a person of a different *varṇa* and who is not a member of the family. Thus Arjuna protesting against the *niyoga* resorted to by Vasiṣṭha with Madayantī says: "Why did king Kalmāṣapāda offered his wife to his own preceptor conversant with *Brahman* and how was it that the high souled Vasiṣṭha even though he is well conversant with *dharma* consented to approach a woman otherwise unapproachable?"⁵⁰ Here Arjuna's protest is doubly aimed. He not only attacks the system of *niyoga* itself, but also disapproves of the fact that Vasiṣṭha approached a woman otherwise unapproachable. The same sentiment is echoed by Śiśupāla when he alleges Bhiṣma saying, "And with the two wives (of Vicitravīrya) children have been procreated by another through a proceeding which good men do not follow and you (Bhiṣma) smug in the wisdom calmly looked on."⁵¹ Śiśupāla here clearly censures the *niyoga* of the queens of Vicitravīrya with Vyāsa as a precedent not being followed by good people and abuses Bhiṣma for allowing such unprecedented behaviour to take place. The protest recorded in the Mahābhārata itself against the divergence in the practice of *niyoga* may well lead us to agree with Winternitz⁵² that really it must have been Bhiṣma who fulfilled his brotherly duty and procreated Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Vyāsa was brought in not only through brahmanic pride but because Bhiṣma's vow of chastity now stood in the way. But it is only to

⁴⁹ Āpastamba, 10, 27, 2-3; Baudhāyana, II, 4, 9-10; Yājñavalkya I, 68-69 Nārada, XII, 80-88.

⁵⁰ Mbh., I, 173, 12.

⁵¹ Mbh., II, 38, 22-24.

⁵² M. Winternitz, Notes on the Mahabharata, J.R.A.S., 1897, p. 721.

his brahmanhood that Vyāsa owed this honour not to his threadbare authorisation as a kinsman. This can clearly be seen from Pāṇḍu's own words when he cites his own birth as an illustration of *niyoga* of a brahmin sage with a *ksatriya* woman. But the very fact that this threadbare relation of Vyāsa's brotherhood with Vicitravīrya had to be found out and had to be interpolated in the narrative shows that an attempt was made to bring the system of *niyoga* in line with the *smṛti* tradition. Appointment of brahmins for *niyoga* may therefore be looked upon as a third phase of *niyoga* and may belong as Dr. Winternitz⁵³ suggests to a period where the brahmanic impudence was at its highest.

While appointment of brahmins was something exceptional the practice of *niyoga* was undergoing transformation in the Epic period, as is evident from the restrictions imposed on it in the Mahābhārata and confirmed by Manu and other *smṛti* writers. Thus firstly it is resorted to only as an *āpaddharama* when the couple had no son and the husband is either disabled or dead.

Secondly, the advantage of the *niyoga* is taken only after due consultation and permission of the elders. Satyawatī not only sought the advice of Bhīṣma but later on consulted both the *purohita* and the council of ministers as well. Pāṇḍu also first discussed the matter with the ascetics of Himālayas and then decided to acquire sons through *niyoga*.⁵⁴ and when such permission is granted, otherwise unapproachable women also can be approached for cohabitation as in the cases of Vasiṣṭha cohabiting with his host's wife and Śvetaketu cohabiting with his preceptor's wife.

Thirdly, whenever *niyoga* is resorted to, the cohabitation takes place from the point of view of procreation only and not sexual pleasure. Vows and ceremonies of purification are undergone by the parties concerned and especially women, because they have to bear the foetus. Thus Vyāsa ordains for the queens of Vicitravīrya a penance lasting for a year. At least purificatory bath and some oblations in the fire were necessary.⁵⁵ And the cohabitation was done only during the time of *ṛtu* so that the conception would be assured.

⁵³ M., Winternitz, Ibid., pp. 731-22

⁵⁴ Also Cf. Mbh., I, 97, 26; I, 111, 11-20 resp.

⁵⁵ Mbh., I, 99, 34 and I, 99, 38-39 resp.

Fourthly, the number of sons produced through *niyoga* was limited. Though the *smṛtis* usually allow only one son, the Epic tradition permits maximum of three sons perhaps because of the belief that having one son was as good as having no son. When Pāṇḍu desired more sons, Kuntī refused saying that the limit is of only three sons and she would be a bad woman if she indulged further in that practice.⁵⁶ Similarly Vyāsa gave three sons to the widows of Vicitravīrya and Saradaṇḍayini also bore three sons called Durjaya and his two brothers. Sometimes only one son was also produced as in conformity with the *dharmaśāstras*, as in the case of Madayantī and Vaśiṣṭha and Sudeśṇā and Dirghatamas.

Sometimes we find that a woman appointed to take recourse for *niyoga* showed reluctance to approach the man who is appointed. Thus queen Sudeśṇā tried to avoid the blind sage Dirghatamas. So did the two wives of Vicitravīrya who sent a *śūdra* woman to sage Vyāsa. This was not because they disapproved of the tradition but because they disapproved the men. The reluctance shown and deceit indulged in the aforementioned cases clearly point out that the consent of the woman appointed for *niyoga* was not taken and *niyoga* was imposed on her. Even if the woman was not willing to submit to *niyoga* she had to, if her husband or elders so desired, as in the case of Kuntī.

The protest that came from Kuntī is the only protest we find in Epics against the tradition of *niyoga* and it presents us with the new idea of fidelity that was slowly being evolved, which was one of the main reasons of the prevalence of the custom of *niyoga* over that of remarriage. Kuntī pronounced the new ideal of absolute faithfulness to one's wedded husband. "I do not want to approach anybody even mentally. I will procreate children only from you and go to heaven with you." She also cited the example of the very chaste wife Bhadrā who seems to be her ideal. Thus the

⁵⁶ Mbh., I, 111, 94-95. This clearly reflects the later ideal of fidelity according to which a woman having sexual connections with a person other than her own husband would be considered a woman of bad moral character. It should be noted that throughout the Epic Kuntī stands for the new conception of sex-morals even though she had herself committed breaches according to the moral standard of those concepts. (She not only had a son while unmarried, but Pāṇḍavas were born of her not by her husband, but through outside agency.) This may perhaps indicate towards priestly manipulations to fit in the mother of the Pāṇḍavas to their standard of sex-behaviour.

concept that wife was a field (*kṣetra*) and whoever planted anything in the field belonged to the owner of the field (husband) and not to the planter, was being replaced by the concept that only the owner could use and plant the field and not anybody else. Perhaps the procreation of the Pāṇdavas by divine agency indicates a make-shift by which Kuntī's ideal of chastity was upheld because the gods revived her virginity back to her. Originally the *nīyoga* must have been gone through by some brahmin as Pāṇdu desired, but since the whole idea became disagreeable to the society, this device was invented to attribute a religious sanction to the birth of the heroes. This also attached divinity to the Pāṇḍava heroes as they could be traced to a superhuman origin.

The sentiment against *nīyoga* is clearly revealed in later *smṛtis* which revile the system of *nīyoga* as old fashioned and befitting to beasts only.⁵⁷ Not only that but the *ksetraja* son who was preferred to other types of sons formerly, now takes a much lower position in such lists of sons. He is included in the first six sons, who can inherit the father's property. Eventhough Manu places him next to the *aurasa* son (son born of one's own self), at other place he remarks, "that son (born of a brother-in-law by *nīyoga*) does not deserve a share equal to his own father (from the family property) according to *dharma*, because father is the chief factor in procreating a child. So a son born from an outside agency gets only that much portion according to *dharma* as is due to his uncle. A son begotten by a younger brother on the widow of the elder brother gets a share equal to his uncle. This is the limit set by *dharma*."⁵⁸ Not only that but Bṛhaspati (XXV, 39-41) places the *ksetraja* son on the same level as *paunarbhava*, *sahodha* and *kānina* and grants him only maintenance from his father's property, and declares the practice of *nīyoga* as unpracticable due to the decadence of spiritual power among men of *dvāpara* and *kali* age.⁵⁹

In the above survey of the evolution of the post-wedlock sex-morals it has been already noticed how the sexual behaviour of a widow was limited only to that, essential for procreation. The earlier concept of remarriage, either to a kinsman or to someone

⁵⁷ Āpastamba II, 10, 27, 2-6 (quoted by P. V. Kane, History of the Dharmasāstras, Vol. III, pp. 926-928); also Cf. Manu IX, 65-69; 161.

⁵⁸ Manu, IX, 120-21.

⁵⁹ P. V. Kane, History of Dharmasāstras, Vol. III, p. 926.

even outside the family was fast being replaced by the new tradition or *niyoga* which put a restriction upon the sex life of a widow. The widows with children led a widowed existence in conformity with the rules laid down for such women in the *smṛti* literature. Thus, in the Epics we find the widowed women mostly staying with the families of their husbands where their status quo is fully granted to them. The queens of Daśaratha ; Satyavatī ; queens of Vicitra-vīrya ; Kuntī ; Uttarā etc. all these and many others are instances of such widows who lead a widowed existence after the death of the husband in their households.

As can be concluded from the rules laid down by the *smṛtis* a widow had to lead an ascetic life and all the luxuries of life were forbidden to her. Manu⁶⁰ lays down a life of complete celibacy for her with the due observance of vows ; fasting and temperance, and guarantees a life in heaven for her even if she had no progeny. The Epic however fails in its didactic portions to lay down any such role for the widowed woman. But it is possible that the life led by the women mentioned above—though all of them stayed in royal palaces—must have been according to the same pattern. Nor is that all. Some of them in their advanced age—when any further calamity in the form of death of sons etc. must have fallen on them—preferred to lead the austere life of a forest hermit and pine away to death. Satyavatī retires to forest with her two daughters-in-law⁶¹ and also Kuntī who follows Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra to forest in spite of her sons' victory.⁶² However it seems that from a widow otherwise prosperous and with a comfortable position in life such a retirement was not expected. This is clearly revealed from the surprise that was felt not only by the Pāṇḍavas themselves but Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra and people at large when Kuntī expressed her desire to follow the latter to forest. Her sons naturally tried to dissuade her from her resolve and Dhṛtarāṣṭra also addressed her through Gāndhārī: "What is said by Yudhiṣṭhira is true; which woman would be so foolish as to leave such mighty and prosperous sons and go to forest ? Kuntī can stay here and follow the vows of giving gifts etc."⁶³ Here is indicated a state where though a

⁶⁰ Manu, V, 157-160; Cf. Yājñavalkya, I, 75.

⁶¹ Mbh., I, 119, 11-12.

⁶² Mbh., XV, 16 ff (Bom. Ed.)

⁶³ Mbh., XV, 18, 6-7 (Bom. Ed.)

woman living a life of complete celibacy, could still enjoy temporal happiness, luxuries being not denied to her. Kuntī perhaps marked out a new mode of living for the widows namely a life devoted to austerities. "O son, I do not desire the royal luxuries won over by my sons; but, O king, what I desire most is the meritorious region of my husband by the performance of austerities."⁶⁴ It is difficult to say how far this attitude reflects the impact of the Buddhist and Jain ideology on the brahmanic norms.⁶⁵

With increasing disfavour towards the custom of remarriage and *niyoga* and the establishment of the concept of chastity extending to post-wedlock sex-morals, the custom of leading a completely celibate life with vows and austere ascetic practices must have gained favour with public opinion, so much so that only a widow who is certified as chaste is allowed a right of inheritance; and for those who sinned were allowed only a maintenance and that too if they offered due expiation, promising to remain chaste thereafter.⁶⁶

The custom of *satī* that prevailed in medieval India originated out of the concept of *pativrata*, according to which a woman belonged to one person only viz. her husband in this life as well as afterwards and had to follow him in death also to prove this. Custom of *satī* thus was the last step reached in the ideal of fidelity.

Though in a hymn in the Ṛgveda (XVIII, 32) a widow is said to ascend the funeral pyre of her husband, she is brought back by the husband's brother or a near kinsman who in all probability married her. Immolation was therefore not prevalent during the vedic age.⁶⁷

The Epic tradition indicates that it was more customary for the widows to join hands with their brothers-in-law. Immolation of widows was however not completely unknown to the Epic compilers. The instances that are met with in the Mahābhārata are the voluntary immolation of Mādrī-Pāṇḍu's younger wife - on the funeral pyre of her husband and the enforced immolation planned for Draupadī by the relatives of Kīcaka on the latter's death. Pāṇḍu was cursed by a sage that he would die if he enjoyed sexual pleasures.

⁶⁴ Mbh., XV, 17, 19 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶⁵ Cf. Miss S. Rao, Sutee, A.B.O.R.I. Vol. XIV, Part III (1932-33), p. 223.

⁶⁶ P. V. Kane, History of the Dharmaśāstras, Vol. III, p. 808.

⁶⁷ Miss S. Rao, 'Sutee', A.B.O.R.I. Vol. XIV, p. 220.

He retired to forest along with his two wives. Once in the spring when the king was moving in the forest bedecked with flowers of *campaka* and *palāśa* and lakes full of lotus flowers, desire for cohabitation arose in him. While he was thus roused Mādri clad in a fine garment approached him. On seeing her thus, the king was madened and finding nobody around, he lost his control. He dragged her forcefully in a secret ambush and forgetting the curse, cohabited with her against her protests and died. On finding the king dead Mādri screamed. This brought Kuntī on the scene who seeing Mādri in company with Pāṇḍu understood what had happened and scolded Mādri for tempting the king. She then decided to follow her husband in death. "I am the eldest wife and I shall share the merit with him. O Mādri, leave the king to me and protect the sons." But Mādri said, "I will follow the husband in death. It was due to the desire of my contact that this best of the Bharatas pined away. How can I keep him dissatisfied even in the abode of Yama? Moreover I shall not be able to handle properly your sons while you will love my sons like your own. The king met death desiring me, so burn this body of mine along with him and please me." So saying she mounted the funeral pyre along with the dead body of the king.⁶⁸

Here a tussle arises between the two wives as to who should ascend the funeral pyre. The promptness with which Kuntī puts forward the idea of *anumaraṇa* and talks of achieving religious merit thereby indicates that *anumaraṇa* must have been prevalent in the Epic period. This brings us very near to the custom of *satī* in which a chaste wife who follows her husband in death not only attains heaven but drags her husband out of hell.⁶⁹ Mādri, on the other hand pleads on an entirely different ground, namely, it was her contact that the king desired and therefore she should accompany him in death so that her husband may satisfy his desire in the next world. The plea put forward by Mādri has the ring of primitive concept of immolation. This worldwide primitive usage of immolation originated out of the motive of contributing happiness to the departed soul by sending his favourite wives, friends, servants and articles of daily use with him so that he may feel well in a

⁶⁸ Mbh., I, 116, 2-31.

⁶⁹ Parāśara Samhitā-Prāyascitta kāṇḍa, verses 33-34 (as quoted by Miss S. Rao, *ibid.*).

familiar atmosphere in the land of the departed.⁷⁰

The episode of Kīcaka⁷¹ in the Epic also reveals the same motive behind the planned immolation of Draupadī. While preparations were being made for cremation of Kīcaka's dead body after his ghastly murder by Bhīma as the former was enamoured of Draupadī and harassed her; the relatives of Kīcaka saw the innocent Draupadī standing at some distance. On seeing her Kīcaka's brother addressed the gathering as follows, "Let us kill this wicked one for whose sake Kīcaka is murdered. Or let us not kill her. We will burn her with this Kīcaka who died full of passion for her because we should try to please that deceased one (Kīcaka) as far as possible. They then asked the permission of the king of Virāṭa saying, "Kīcaka has died because of this woman, so we want to burn her along with Kīcaka's corpse and you should allow us to do so." The king of Virāṭa, considering the strength of Kīcaka's relatives consented to the proposal. On hearing this Draupadī fainted but the relatives put her on the bier carrying Kīcaka's corpse and tied her there.

Draupadī was ultimately rescued from her forced immolation by her valiant husband Bhīma. Yet the passage quoted above makes it clear enough that Draupadī was not only captured with that intention but a royal permit was obtained and she was actually tied on the bier carrying Kīcaka's corpse and was taken towards the crematorium. The point to be specially noted here is, that at first the relatives of Kīcaka thought of killing her to take revenge of Kīcaka's death but at once changed their minds and decided to burn her so that Kīcaka who died full of passion for this girl in this life would be satisfied in the next. This may indicate a belief that the soul of the deceased might be satisfied if the thing which he desired most at the time of his death was burnt with him on the same funeral pyre. Another thing to be noted here is that the immolation was not of the traditional type because a woman with whom the deceased had no concern except that he was enamoured of her at the time of death, was taken as an offering.

Thus the passage serves more as an instance of the Epic brutality indicating to those ages of hoary antiquity where might was right and a woman belonged to one who could get her with the power of

⁷⁰ Cf. E. Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, Vol. I, p. 317.

A. S. Altekar, *Position of Women in Hindu Culture*, p. 138.

⁷¹ Mbh., IV, 22, 1-11.

his sword. Yet the instance may well serve as an example of the antique tradition of offering the most desired object including a woman, on the funeral pyre of the deceased and cremating it with the corpse.

The later ideal of fidelity with which Kunti's stand appears to be in conformity is fully revealed in the story of pigeons narrated in the *Śāntiparva*.⁷² A hunter who used to catch birds and kill them was once caught in a storm accidentally while on a hunting tour. He took refuge under a tree. There dwelt on the tree a couple of pigeons, whose female partner had been trapped by the hunter. The male who was anxiously awaiting his wife's arrival eulogised his chaste wife. The female pigeon who was listening to it in a cage advised her husband to receive the guest who had come to their abode in such a storm. The pigeon therefore brought fire for him, and finding him very hungry sacrificed his own self in the burning fire that his guest may eat his meat and satisfy his hunger. The hunter on witnessing this great sacrifice on the part of the bird felt so ashamed of his own profession that he decided to practise penance. He freed all the captured birds. The female pigeon when freed started lamenting the death of her husband, "Even though a widow has many sons she constantly grieves for her husband and becomes a cause of grief to her relatives. O, my husband, formerly I was very happy, but now I am most unhappy because in this world a brother, father, or a son can but give limited happiness to a woman, only a husband can bestow upon her immeasurable bliss. Is there any such woman who would not serve her husband? There is no other protector for a woman than her husband; there is no other happiness than one's own husband. Realising this, a woman should seek the protection of her husband setting aside wealth and other worldly pleasure. O, my lord, why should I stay all alone in this world without you? Is there any such woman who would desire to prolong her life when her husband is dead?" The she-pigeon then jumped into the burning fire. She saw her husband sitting in a celestial car, adorned with golden ornaments and fine clothes in the midst of many such great-souled people.

The arguments noted above echo the concept of fidelity according to which the husband was the centre of the woman's universe. She also affirmed that a widow who constantly grieved for her

⁷² Mbh., XII, 144.

husband became a burden to her relatives and hence should better relieve them. Elsewhere also a wife argues that she would become protectionless if her husband would die and people would prey upon her, "Just as birds pounce upon meat fallen on the ground, people pounce upon unprotected women and people without strength."⁷³ Does this indicate that unprotected women unwelcomed by their relatives were pried by the crooks in the society and thus stood in danger? Was this one of the causes in burning a widow to follow her husband rather than survive the misery of an unprotected widowhood?

There is an illustration of immolation of women in the Rāmāyaṇa,⁷⁴ but the motive for immolation there is entirely different from those discussed above. "Once Rāvaṇa wandering on this earth freely at his will went to the Himālayas where he saw a very beautiful damsel attired in the garb of an ascetic and performing a severe penance. Rāvaṇa being struck on seeing such a beautiful woman approached her. The girl welcomed him and on being questioned, disclosed her family history. She was Vedavatī—the daughter of Kuśadhvaṇa, son of Bṛhaspati. Her father wanted to get her married with Viṣṇu and refused all proposals for marriage made by gods, *yaksas*, *gandharvas*, etc. The king of demons Śumbha enraged at this insult murdered Kuśadhvaṇa at night. Vedavatī's mother burnt herself along with her dead husband. From then onwards Vedavatī performed severe austerities so that her father's desire of getting her married with Viṣṇu might be realised. But Rāvaṇa who pined for her, tried to dissuade Vedavatī from her purpose, speaking ill of Viṣṇu and dragging her by her hair towards himself. Vedavatī was very angry at this behaviour of Rāvaṇa, she cut off her hair and producing fire from her body burnt herself saying "O Anārya, you have touched me, so it does not befit me to live longer. But I will be reborn on this earth to destroy you. It is difficult for me, a woman, to kill a sinful man like you, and if I would curse you my *tapas* would be destroyed. But if I have performed good actions such as giving gifts, etc. I may be reborn as a chaste daughter of some religious minded person."

Here it may be noticed that besides a regular *satī* in the instance

⁷³ Mbh., I, 146, 9-12.

⁷⁴ Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, 17 ff.

of Vedavati's mother, Vedavati herself enters the fire because Rāvaṇa had polluted her by touching. Of course there was no other harm done to her, but so strict must have been her vow of chastity that after considering Viṣṇu as her lord she could not tolerate anybody's touch and preferred to die on being molested by a stranger. Yet along with this motive she also declared that she would be reborn to wreak vengeance for the insult inflicted on her. It is difficult to say whether vengeance or molestation was the prime factor in driving her to burn herself.⁷⁵ It is however certain that preservice of chastity must have become one of the most important urges in the evolution of the tradition of immolation of widows.

The other instances of *satī* found in the Mahābhārata are as follows: (i) the four wives of Vasudeva—Devakī, Bhadrā, Rohiṇī and Madirā, mount the funeral pyre along with the dead body of their husband;⁷⁶ (ii) favourite wives of Vasudeva enter fire⁷⁷ and (iii) Vyasa advises the widows of the dead warriors of the Mahābhārata war to plunge themselves in Gaṅgā and the women behaving accordingly to achieve the world of their husbands.⁷⁸

The above survey thus shows that by the time of the final recension of both the Epics the custom of *satī* had been in vogue. Yet it should be noted that it was not compulsory for a widow to be a *satī*. Even a champion of the post-wedlock chastity like Manu⁷⁹ does not advocate *satī* but allows *nīyoga*, and for a widow with child, an ascetic life. Yājñavalkya⁸⁰ follows suit. Moreover

⁷⁵ Vengeance is found as a driving urge in the immolation of Ambā, daughter of the king of Kāśī—who was abducted from a *svayamvara* along with two of her younger sisters. After her abduction she confessed to Bhīṣma that she was in love with Śālvarāja and had decided to get married to him. So Bhīṣma allowed her to go to her lover. But the lover now refused to accept her because she had been already won over by another person. The girl decided to take revenge on Bhīṣma and attempted in various ways to take his life but failed. She therefore performed a severe penance and later immolated herself to be reborn as Śikhandī who actually killed Bhīṣma in the great war.

⁷⁶ Mbh., XVI, 7, 24 (Bom. Ed.)

⁷⁷ Mbh., XVI, 7, 73 (Bom. Ed.)

⁷⁸ Mbh., XV, 33, 17 (Bom. Ed.)—This can not be called actual immolation but the motive behind the voluntary drowning is the same as that of *satī*.

⁷⁹ Manu, V, 158-160, 64.

⁸⁰ Yājñavalkya, I, 75.

all the principal *smṛtis* discuss the rights of inheritance of the widows. The practice of immolation is recommended for the widow by Viṣṇu⁸¹ and Bṛhaspati⁸² as an alternative to ascetic life. That *satī* was a convention but had not become compulsory even by 6th or 7th century A.D. can only mean that it was not popular and was not resorted to frequently. It was only among the Rajputs of the medieval period that the custom had gained ascendancy.

An interesting passage in the Parāśara saṁhitā (7th Century A.D.) records the various stages of the post-wedlock sex-morals which we have traced above. The passage reads: "When the husband of a woman has disappeared, is dead, has turned a recluse, is impotent or has been ex-communicated, another husband is permitted to a woman." "That woman who, when the husband is dead, performs the vow of chastity (*brahmacarya*) attains heaven after death like a *brahmacari*". "She who follows her husband will abide in heaven for as much time as there is hair on a human being (i.e. three thousand crore and a half). As a snake charmer takes out a snake from a hole by force, in the same manner the wife (who immolates herself) taking out the husband (from hell) enjoys (heavenly bliss)."

⁸¹ Viṣṇu, XXXV, 14.

⁸² Bṛhaspati, XXV, 11.

⁸³ Parāśara Saṁhitā-Prāyascitta kāṇḍa, V, 30-34 as quoted by Miss S. Rao, A.B.O.R.I. Vol. XIV, pp. 225-227.

CHAPTER VI

MARRIAGE TABOOS

Due to the strength of the sexual instinct and its disturbing influence all human societies have tried to regulate the outlet of sexual cravings by various devices. Taboo on marriage between close kin in most societies is an illustration of this attitude. In the words of Dr. Westermarck, "The horror of Incest is an almost universal characteristic of mankind, the cases which seem to indicate a perfect absence of this feeling being so rare that they must be regarded merely as anomalous aberrations of general rules."¹

The Vedic hymns are said to be containing references to incestuous relations. Agni is said to impregnate his own mother.² In the same *samhita*, and elsewhere, is described the incestuous relation of Prajāpati with his daughter.³ The twin gods Āsvinas—the children of Savitr and Uṣas married their sister Sūryā. Pūṣan loved his sister.⁴ The famous dialogue between Yama and Yamī refers to a brother-sister love affair. The Ṛgveda (X, 162,5) in a magic incantation reads, "He who sleeps with you becoming your brother, husband or lover and who kills your progeny, him I destroy". The *gosava* ceremony described in the ritualistic literature, involves intercourse with the mother, the sister and a *sagotra* girl.⁵ The Aitareya brāhmaṇa (VII, 13, 9-10) also refers to incestuous relations between the mother and a son.⁶

The attitude of Ṛgveda towards such incestuous relation is clearly and emphatically hostile. In the dialogue between Yama and Yamī sex-relation between a brother and a sister is unmistakably declared as sinful. The Atharvaveda also declares, "He who

¹ E. Westermarck, History of Human Marriage, Vol. II, p. 296.

² Ṛgveda, V, 3, 3.

³ Ṛgveda, X, 61, 5-7; Atharvaveda III, 6, 7. For other reference to father-daughter incest also cf. S. C. Sarkar, Some Aspects of the Earliest Social History of India, pp. 137-138.

⁴ Ṛgveda, VI, 55, 4; X, 21, 8.

⁵ Āpastamba Śrāutasūtra XXII, 13, 2; Satyasādhaśrautasūtra, XVII, 5, 25 as quoted by K. M. Kapadia, Hindu Kinship, p. 47.

⁶ As quoted by S. V. Karandikar, Hindu Exogamy, p. 11.

defiles a sister, must suffer down below.”⁷ The incestuous act of Prajāpati is also condemned as an unprecedented action. The Brāhmaṇa texts declare, “Prajāpati does a deed which was never done before.”⁸ What is even more significant, Prajāpati’s body is pierced through with an arrow as a punishment of his sin. Taking into consideration the allegorical language of Ṛgveda, the evidence can hardly be considered as providing the existence of incestuous relation during the vedic period. Iravati Karve also, who once advocated the prevalence of incest on the basis of kinship terminology has admitted, “I think now that we have not enough proof for assuming such a custom.”⁹

Besides these mythological references there are puranic traditions which according to the interpretation of S.C. Sarkar record brother-sister marriages. He refers to a number of references in the puranic genealogies, as well as Buddhist *jātaka* legends where kings and brahmins marry their *pitr-kanyās*, viz. half sisters.¹⁰ But *pitr-kanyā* does not mean half-sister. As Ghurye¹¹ believes the term may refer to any distant cousin or a female of the family. Iravati Karve has interpreted marriage with *pitr-kanyā* as cousin marriages.¹²

The marriage hymn of the Ṛgveda (X,85) categorically indicates that marriage was contracted outside the family circle.¹³ Upto what generation family relationship was recognised for this purpose cannot be definitely ascertained. The Epic evidence confirms Vedic practice. The way in which Karna condemns sex freedom in the Madra and the Bālīhika countries brings out the contempt the compiler of the Mahābhārata harboured for such laxity, “They are shameless, these Bālīhikas, they indulge at pleasure in the presence of everybody and with anybody, even with close relatives—with father, mother, son, mother-in-law, mother’s brother, son-in-law, daughter, grandsons, kindred, friends, guests and also the slaves.”¹⁴

⁷ Atharvaveda, XX, 128, 2.

⁸ J. Muir, Original Sanskrit Texts, Vol. I, p. 188.

⁹ I. Karve, Kinship Organisations in India, p. 45.

¹⁰ S. C. Sarkar, Some Aspects of the Earliest Social History of India, pp. 116-35.

¹¹ G. S. Ghurye, Some Kinship Usages in Indo-Aryan Literature, Journal of Anthropological Society; Bombay, Vol. I, p. 10.

¹² I. Karve, Kinship Organisation in India, pp. 46-47; also refer K. M. Kapadia, Hindu Kinship, p. 49.

¹³ S. V. Karandikar, Hindu Exogamy, p. 12.

¹⁴ Mbh., VIII, 27, 75-76.

There is also positive evidence in the Epic condemning incestuous relation, particularly between the father and the daughter. King Pratipa was approached by the river goddess Gaṅgā for the satisfaction of her sexual desire. She occupied the right side of his lap and requested the king to satisfy her passion. But the king refused saying, "O beautiful one, your proposal is pleasing, but it is due to your own fault that I cannot accept it, because it would be destructive of *dharma*. You have chosen the right side of my lap reserved for one's children (*apatyas*) and daughter-in-law. You have not occupied the left thigh which is occupied by a beloved. So I will not be able to satisfy you. But I select you as my daughter-in-law."¹⁵ The episode indicates that not only the daughter but also the daughter-in-law was unapproachable, supporting the tradition found as early as the Atharvaveda where a daughter-in-law is advised to observe modesty before father-in-law.¹⁶

The Epic also records that sex-relations between a mother and a son were not within the bounds of *dharma*. When Arjuna was in the heaven Urvaśī was struck with passion for him and approached him. But Arjuna refused her saying, "O beautiful one, I am really void of learning because you think me capable of such a type of sinful action (of cohabiting with you). You are a wife of my ancestor (*guru*) to me. I consider you to be of the same status as Kuntī and Śacī—wife of Indra. . . . O Apsarā, you should not entertain such unworthy thoughts about me. You are more respectable than all the elders because you are the mother of my family. . . . Just as Kuntī, Madrī and Śacī are my mothers, so are you also, hence fit to be worshipped."¹⁷ Arjuna considered Urvaśī as his mother because she was once the wife of Purūravā—an ancestor of Arjuna.

¹⁵ Mbh., I, 9-11.

¹⁶ Atharvaveda, VIII, 6, 24.

Also cf. G. S. Ghurye, Family and Kin in Indo-European Culture pp. 46-47.

¹⁷ Mbh., III, 46, 37-41; 45-46 (Bom. Ed.)

(This episode is dropped from the critical edition of the Mahābhārata as a later interpolation. But I have mentioned it here because it reflects very clear sentiments against mother-son relations which must have been so strong as to denounce such a far-fetched relation as existed between Arjuna and Urvaśī by the time of the final compilation of the Epic.)

In the episode not only mother is avoided, but relation with any lady who may be considered to have the same status as one's mother is considered to be against *dharma*. It is in consonance with this attitude of the Epic writer that even the wife of the preceptor is considered unapproachable because she was revered like one's mother. According to Vedic Index¹⁸ though one of the duties of the *brahmacārin* was chastity, reference is made in several places to the possibility of misconduct between a student and the wife of his preceptor. The Mahābhārata also refers to Śvetaketu who begot a son on the wife of his preceptor.¹⁹ But in another anecdote sexual relations with a preceptor's wife is considered an unworthy act. In the absence of the preceptor Devāsarma, his pupil Uttuṅka was entrusted with the management of the hermitage. His preceptor's wife then entered in the period of her *ṛtu*. The women of the *āśrama* thereupon approached Uttuṅka with a request to cohabit with the preceptor's wife, so that her *ṛtu* may not go waste. But Uttuṅka thought, "I should not act in this unworthy manner, as I am not instructed by my preceptor to fulfil this demand." When the preceptor returned, he was much pleased with Uttuṅka and bestowed upon him all the *siddhis* (mysterious powers) and permitted him to go home.²⁰ The fact that the preceptor's wife as well as the women of the hermitage did not find anything immoral in Uttuṅka's approach to the wife of his preceptor who had entered the period of her *ṛtu*, confirms the view of the author of the Vedic Index. But the preceptor applauding Uttuṅka for not complying with the request made to him shows a new trend in which the preceptor's wife is given the status of the mother and accordingly any connection with her is considered incestuous and therefore unrighteous. The episode also notes that the preceptor was so much pleased with Uttuṅka's behaviour towards his wife that he bestowed unsolicited boons on him. This clearly indicates that Uttuṅka's behaviour was not normal, but ideal. The didactic portions of the Mahābhārata along with the *smṛti* literature enumerate sexual relations with wife of a preceptor as the gravest of the sins (*mahāpātaka*) and prescribe death as its atonement.²¹

¹⁸ A. A. Macdonell, and Keith, Vedic Index, Vol. I, p. 76.

¹⁹ Mbh., XII, 35, 22.

²⁰ Mbh., I, 3, 89.

²¹ Mbh., XII, 36, 17-18; Manu, XI, 54.

If relations with mother was prohibited, its counterpart is to prevent the relation between a man and his daughter-in-law and this is what is done in the Epic when the preceptor is asked not to approach the disciple's wife or the *purohita* the wife of his host (because she was like a daughter-in-law). According to an account given by the *gandharva* Citraratha Vasiṣṭha begets on Madayanti, the queen of king Saudasa Kalmāṣapāda, a son by appointment (*niyoga*). On hearing this, Arjuna at once voiced his protest against this, "Why did king Kalmāṣapāda offer his wife to his own preceptor²²—conversant with *Brahman*, and how was it that even the high-souled Vasiṣṭha even though he was well conversant with *dharma* consented to approach a woman otherwise unapproachable?" *Gandharva* Citraratha had to fabricate a long story of a curse imposed upon Kalmāṣapāda according to which only Vasiṣṭha whose son was formerly killed by him could bestow a son on him.

A further extension of the same convention was to consider the preceptor's daughter as a sister. Kaca's refusal of Devayāni's proposal of marriage must have been on the same ground, though the Mahābhārata does not clarify the point.²³ Devayāni's proposal to Kaca on the other hand, records a trend according to which no such spiritual kinship is recognised, between the preceptor's daughter and a disciple. This is evident from the records of the legal tradition. Manu does not include a preceptor's daughter in the list of unapproachable women, cohabitation with whom would lead to a sin equal to cohabitation with a preceptor's wife.²⁴ A later writer Nārada, however, includes preceptor's daughter along with the preceptor's wife, in the list of unapproachable women, (*agamyās*).²⁵

In the preceding chapter²⁶ we have already referred to the customs prohibiting sexual connections between brother-in-law, elder or younger, and sister-in-law.

It is evident from this discussion about sex-relationship between near kin that the Epic tradition is against any sort of consanguine relations. By the time of the final compilation of the Epics, not

²² Mbh., I, 178, 2-3.

²³ Mbh., I, 72, 6-11.

²⁴ Manu, XI, 70.

²⁵ Nārada, XII, 13-15.

²⁶ Ref. Chapt. No. V,

only such relations are condemned but they are stamped as sins for which expiations have to be offered. Moreover, a new concept of prohibiting sex-relationship on the ground of spiritual kinship is being evolved as reflected in the epic-narrative and which is finalised in the didactic portions viz. stamping of sex-relationship with spiritual kin as incest. Śāntiparva²⁷ already condemns sexual relationship with unapproachable women as a sin and lays down an expiation for the same. "The sinful person should wander with a wet cloth round his body, apply ashes and sleep on a heap of ashes at night." The Epics, however, do not define the unapproachable women as Manu does. Manu enumerates such females as one's own sister, a friend's wife, daughter-in-law, a virgin and a woman of a very low caste (*antyajā*) unapproachable and raises the violation to the category of sin of cohabiting with the preceptor's wife—the atonement for which was death.

A reference in the didactic portion of the Epics advises that a person should contract marriage with a girl who is neither a *sapinda* nor a *sagotra*. It says, "Manu has said that a girl who is neither a *sagotra* nor a *sapinda* should be taken as a wife according to *dharma*".²⁸ Though the word "*gotra*" in the text of Manu is explained by some as an exogamous group formed on the basis of similarity of *pravaras*, the available evidence shows that Manu hardly used the word in that sense. . . . Between the Rgvedic period and the period of Chāndogya Upaniṣad the word assumed the meaning of family or a family name and is used in that sense by Kautilya and in a passage of the Mahābhārata."²⁹ It may hence be concluded that the verse quoted above restricts marriage relationship in a family circle. Another restriction that is referred, is that the girl should not be a *sapinda*. The Mahābhārata does not indicate the number of generations to be avoided in *sapinda* relationship. On the vedic evidence it is conceded that while marriage with a father's brother's daughter never took place amongst the vedic Aryans, marriage in third generation with cognates was allowed.³⁰ The Epic corroborates this conclusion by

²⁷ Mbh., XII, 36, 31.

²⁸ Mbh., XIII, 44, 18 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁹ K. M. Kapadia, Hindu Kinship, pp. 55-56.

³⁰ S. V. Karandikar Hindu Exogamy, p. 19; also Cf. K. M. Kapadia, Ibid., p. 63.

providing a number of instances of cross-cousin marriage in the Pāṇḍava family and among the Yādavas.³¹ The *sūtras* and *smṛtis* on the other hand, however, forbid marriage even with cognates related within five degrees.³² Manu prescribes a punishment in form of a lunar penance for marriage with a female related in the third generation.³³ The custom of cross-cousin marriage is allowed only as a local custom in the south.³⁴

Restrictions on marital choice, on consideration of consanguinity have been examined. But the Epics also record marriage taboos in terms of *varṇa* position of an individual. The breaking of rules of consanguinity was a breach which was not very seriously punished; breach of rules regulating inter-*varṇa* marriage however, was a serious lapse in social behaviour which was not tolerated. It is hence that the later type of taboo has persisted down today.

The Epic is conversant with the technical words *anuloma* i.e., taking a wife below one's own *varṇa* and *pratiloma* which meant marrying a woman belonging to a higher *varṇa*. Giving a discourse upon marriage Bhiṣma³⁵ says, "A brahmin has a right to marry, a woman of three *varṇas*. A *ksatriya* has a right to marry a woman belonging to the two *varṇas*; while a *vaiśya* has a right to marry a woman of his own *varṇa*, because it is only on those wives that a progeny equal to one's own status can be produced".

Bhiṣma records a different opinion with regard to taking a *śūdra* wife. He states "Some scripture writers believe that a man of the higher three *varṇas* can marry a woman belonging to a *śūdra varṇa*; but such a wife is meant only for pleasure, and not for acquiring religious merit or begetting progeny, because good people do not appreciate procreation in a *śūdra* woman. Again, the religious scriptures also state that a brahmin who begets children on a *śūdra* woman should expiate his sin."³⁶

It is seen from this that even when a *śūdra* wife is allowed, the progeny of such a union is not given any status in society but is looked down as sinful. In spite of this theoretical ban on marriage

³¹ Mbh., I, 213, 12.

³² Vaśiṣṭha, VIII, 2.

³³ Manu, XI, 171, 172.

³⁴ Baudhāyana, 1, 2, 1-5.

³⁵ Mbh., XIII, 44, 11 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

³⁶ Mbh., XIII, 44, 13 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

with a *śūdra* wife the eminent persons in the Epics contract marriage with women of *śūdra* or even lower *varṇas*. King Śantanu not only married Matsyagandhā, a daughter of a fisherman, and her children succeeded him on the throne of Hastināpura. He also married Gaṅgā whose lineage is not given in the Epic and a son Bhīṣma is the defacto ruler at the court of Hastināpura.³⁷ Arjuna who married a Nāga woman Ulūpi by name and Bhīma a *rāksasa* woman Hidimbā by name. Hidimbā's son was acknowledged as Bhīma's son and he fought with the Kauravas in the Mahābhārata war. Dhṛtarāṣṭra raised a son Yuyutsu on a *vaiśya* woman. The sage Jaratkāru married a woman of *sarpa* race in order to procure a son who saved his ancestors from hell. Thus the *ksatriyas* and especially royalty did not hesitate to pick up women from whatever station in life, if the latter happened to please their eyes, following the dictum, "Women and jewels are to be picked up from anywhere."³⁸

Not only the *ksatriyas* but also the brahmins who had intense scruples regarding purity of blood and morality are known to have married royal princesses. Renūkā and Jamadagni, Sukanyā and Cyavana, Satyawatī and R̥eika, Lopāmudrā and Agatsya, R̥ṣyasr̥ṅga and Śāntā³⁹ are but a few eminent examples of such couples in the Epics. Nay, some brahmins who resided in the areas inhabited by the *nisādas* did not lose either their status or their virile power either by contracting marriage with a *nisāda* woman as the story of Garuḍa illustrates.⁴⁰ Garuḍa flies to fetch nectar to free his mother Vinatā from the slavery of his step-mother Kadru. His mother warns him to eat everything but brahmins to satisfy his huge appetite. "A brahmin" she says, "will burn you as soon as he enters your stomach; so avoid a brahmin and eat *nisādas*." But on his way by mistake Garuḍa

³⁷ It is to be noted how the whole idea became repugnant to the society as marriage restrictions developed and legends were woven round these personalities showing one as born of a royal person while the other as divine.

³⁸ Mbh., XII, 159, 30.

³⁹ The reference to R̥ṣyasr̥ṅga's father performing a purificatory right because his son married the daughter of a *ksatriya* king seems to be a later addition. Yet it is to be noted that in spite of the *prāyascitta* he accepts Śāntā as his daughter-in-law. Rāmāyaṇa, translated by Griffith. I, XVIII, p. 104.

⁴⁰ Mbh., I, 24, 10-13.

gulps down a brahmin along with the brahmin's wife, who was a *nisādi*. As soon as the couple reached Garuḍa's throat he felt a burning sensation. And so realising his mistake he vomited the mouthful which consisted of the brahmin and his *nisāda* wife. As soon as he did so he was relieved of pain.

Though the whole story is narrated with a view to glorifying the cause of brahmins who could burn even the mighty son of Vinatā, it also throws an indirect light on the social conditions of the time, viz., some brahmins who resided in the areas otherwise inhabited by the *nisādas* were in no way polluted by the nearness of their company and did not lose their status thereby. Not only that but even a marriage with a *nisāda* woman had no effect upon such a person. The brahmin of the story even though married to a *nisāda* retained the brahmanical glory.

The sage Dīrghatamas knowingly established sexual connections with a *śūdra* woman and begot not less than eleven sons upon her, famous as sages by the name of Kakṣivān. When asked by King Bali whose children they were he proudly declared them to be his own, and furthermore he initiated them in the vedic lores.

The Rāmāyaṇa⁴¹ notes the instance of Śravaṇa who was born out of the union of a *vaiśya* with a *śūdra* woman. In spite of this he is constantly addressed as *muni* or *muni putra* by Daśaratha, mistaking him for the son of a brahmin because of his virtuous character. Even when he revealed his true identity Daśaratha treated his parents respectfully. They even possessed power to curse Daśaratha—a *ksatriya* who was of higher status.

The condition of society reflected in the above tales is corroborated by a verse in the Anuśāsana⁴² parva which allows a brahmin to marry the wives of all the four *varṇas* as against the statement made above by Bhiṣma who allows wives from only the three *dvija varṇas*.

The Epics thus reveal an earlier phase of *varṇa* marriages in which union with *śūdra* woman was not much looked down upon, neither the association with her led to pollution.

A story narrated in Śāntiparva (166 ff) however reads: A brahmin, Gautama by name, contracted a marriage with a *dasyu* woman and by adopting the profession of a hunter fell from his

⁴¹ Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 64, 46-50.

⁴² Mbh., XIII, 48, 4 (Bom. Ed.)

status. Not only that but his friend who visited him refused to touch his food. This clearly indicates that brahmin Gautama by his marriage with a *śūdra* woman lost his brahminhood and a fellow brahmin who had preserved it, refused even to touch things or eat the food offered by him. Though the reason of his losing his *varṇa* is not entirely on account of marriage to a *śūdra* woman but also due to his long association, and adoption of the profession fit for a *śūdra*. But marriage and long association apart from the profession was one of the reasons of losing one's *varṇa* is corroborated by the Epic when it is said, "A brahmin who stays in a village with only one well for twelve years and a brahmin who stays as the husband of a *śūdra* woman for twelve years are as good as *śūdras*."⁴³ Elsewhere it is said that a brahmin attains hell by inviting a *śūdrā* to his bed and he has to expiate his sin according to *śāstras*, but if he produced children on her he has to perform double *prāyascitta*."⁴⁴

This represents the final state in the *anuloma* marriages with a woman of *śūdra varṇa*. Formerly such connections were established, though sometimes not recognised by the society; but as the *varṇa* system started becoming rigid *śūdras* as representing the lowest strata of the society were first to be eliminated and a marriage connection with a *śūdra* woman was not only disgraceful but the fellow who contracted it, lost his social status and also incurred sin.

In a discourse upon marriage Bhiṣma specifically reserves that right of the wife to participate in religious ceremonies only for a *savarnā* wife. "Of the three wives that a brahmin has married, the brahmin woman is the best wife; and for a *ksatriya* the *ksatriya* wife is the best." That this rule must have been a later development to strengthen *varṇa* endogamy is obvious from the fact that all the *ksatriya* girls who had married the brahmin sages commanded respect, Lopāmudrā having been famous for her ascetic wisdom and chastity. And is it not very usual to find that a husband favours the youngest wife more, the consideration of *varṇa* having been out of his consideration?

Bhiṣma reinforces his arguments by discussing the status of sons born on the wives of different *varṇas* by adding, "The son produced from a *śūdra* woman by a brahmin is not considered

⁴³ Mbh., XIII, 165, 21 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁴ Mbh., XIII, 47, 9 (Bom. Ed.)

a brahmin because he is not efficient in a brahmin's *dharma* but sons born out of brahmin, *ksatriya* and *vaiśya* women are considered brahmins, because in the Dharmaśāstras there are only four *varṇas* and a fifth one is not found.⁴⁵

With the lowering of the status of the *vaiśya* due to their more frequent assimilation with the *śūdra varṇa* the next turn of elimination was for them, and thus it is ordained, "A brahmin has a right to marry girls from any of four *varṇas*, but of the sons born of all the wives those of his own *varṇa* as well as the *ksatriya varṇa* are considered as belonging to his own *varṇa* while those born of *vaiśya* and *śūdra* women are considered as belonging to their mother's *varṇas*."⁴⁶ On the same principle the issues on a woman of the immediate low *varṇa* inherited the *varṇa* of the father.⁴⁷ Bhiṣma puts further restriction by laying down the rule: "A woman, with whom one is married, is called a *dārā*. In this world, all *dārās* are not of equal status. If a brahmin marries women of other three castes first, and then a brahmin woman, even then, that brahmin woman only is worthy of respect . . . O king, a son born of a brahmin woman to a brahmin and that of a *ksatriya* woman to a brahmin are both equal from other points of view, but can never be of an equal status. Never can a brahmin and *ksatriya* woman be equal in this world, and that is why O King, the son of a brahmin woman is considered more worthy." And thus by comparing the respective *varṇa* duties he tries to establish the difference firmly.

The above survey reveals clearly that *anuloma* marriage was allowed and encouraged. In course of time however its scope came to be restricted by defining the status of a wife wedded in this marriage and sons born of this variety of marriage. This indicates that before the final compilation of the Epics *varṇa* endogamy was emphasised though it had not become obligatory.

Pratiloma marriages on the other hand were prohibited from the very beginning. Nowhere has the Epic shown any consideration for that type of marriage. Whenever they have been referred to they have been attacked. This is clearly reflected in Drupada's remark when his daughter was taken away by the Pāṇḍavas dis-

⁴⁵ Mbh., XIII, 47, 17-18. (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁶ Mbh., XIII, 48, 4 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁷ Mbh., XIII, 47, 31; 37-38 (Bom. Ed.); also Cf. Manu, X, 6.

guised as unknown brahmins. He asked Dhṛṣṭadyumna with a fallen face, "With whom has she gone? Who took her away? Did any *śūdra* or a person of a low birth take her away? Or is she taken away by a *vaiśya*? Who has placed his foot over my head? Who has cast the garland in the cemetery?"⁴⁸

The single exception of the *pratiloma* marriage found in the Epic is the marriage of Devayāni, daughter of Śukrācārya and King Yayāti, a *ksatriya*. Yayāti refused Devayāni's proposal of marriage, saying "O, daughter of Uśanas, I am not worthy of you. A king is not fit to enter in wedlock with a family like that of your father." Devayāni tried to plead her case by referring to the common origin of the brahmins and *ksatriyas*. But Yayāti refused saying: "Though all other four *varṇas* are born out of one body of Brahmā their *dharma* and *śauca* are different and out of these the brahmins are the best. Moreover people know the wrath of the brahmin to be more even than that of an infuriated poisonous snake, because the latter kills but one at a time—so does a weapon; but the wrath of a brahmin if aroused destroys the whole nation along with their cities. Thus a brahmin is difficult to win. Till you are not bestowed upon me by your father, I will not accept you." Only after Śukrācārya promised him to remove the sin accruing out of this marriage which according to Yayāti would produce a mixed progeny (*varṇasankara*) that he consented to get married to Devayāni. This dialogue between the two goes far to prove that it was more a marriage of convenience and not indicative of any general practice. The marriage, in spite of so much precautions taken to present it before the public opinion favourably, must have been so unconvincing to the preconceived notion of inter-*varṇa* marriages that the Epic writer found out an excuse in putting a curse over Devayāni through Kaca, her former lover, that she would never be able to obtain the son of a sage as her husband, indicating thereby that Devayāni would stoop to an inferior type of marriage in selecting the son of a *ksatriya* instead of an ascetic brahmin. As if this pretext did not suffice, Devayāni tries to justify her selection by saying, "O, son of Nahuṣa, never have I touched the hand of a man formerly. Only you have done so, So I will marry you. How can anybody else touch the hand which was held by you"?

⁴⁸ Mbh., I, 184, 14-15

CHAPTER VII

STATUS OF WOMEN

"Our moral ideals regarding women have been too often conceived in a narrow sense as concerned with the department of what has been called sexual morality and with obligations of chastity and moral fidelity. The ideals of womanhood include, not merely the relations of husband and wife, or mother and children, or the other intimate relationship of family life, but the recognition accorded to her personality, the notions we form about her capacity, her character, her claim to equality, independence, and freedom for development, her rights to personal liberty, to the ownership and control of property, to the choice of her vocation and to her rights as well as duties as a member of society."¹

The Indo-Aryan tradition records a much diversified opinion as regards the attitude towards the status of women. Even when we find women adored and respected in the capacity of a wife and a mother, as women they are condemned. Right from the vedic times² there was present an under-current of opinion which was hostile to women, sneered at them, and treated them with scorn. Harping on the weaknesses in the nature of women, viz., their vanity, their fickleness, and their love of the light side of life—they are always described as crafty creatures created for the purpose of tempting men astray from the path of virtue.

The Epics also lend support to this view. Yudhiṣṭhira, the incarnation of *dharma* described women thus, "Women are like field (*ksetra*) begetting progeny and hence they can be compared with *prakṛti*. Know, men to be like the Lord-knower of the *ksetra* (*ksetra-jña*). So women should be avoided. They are horrible like demonesses, who ensnare even the learned; they are sensual pleasure incarnate; they are the actual embodiment of the *rajas* quality."³

Women are also described as possessing an insatiable lust for

¹ Sir S. Aiyer, *Evolution of Hindu Moral Ideas*, p. 34.

² R. V. X, 95, 15; IV, 33, 17; Maitrāyaṇi Samhitā, I, 10, 11; Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, III, 2, 3, 6.

³ Mbh., XII, 206, 8-9.

sexual pleasures. They place the joy derived from the coitus higher than anything else. In a dialogue between Aṣṭāvakra and Diśā the latter exposed her own sex in the following way, "O brahmin, a woman loves the pleasure derived from senses even more than the gods, like Vāyu, Agni and Varuṇa because they are by nature lustful. Out of a hundred thousand women hardly one can be found who is faithful to her husband. Women know no limits in this matter. Putting aside their family honour and respect towards their father, mother, brother, son, husband or brother-in-law, they indulge in sexual pleasure with anybody like a big river, rushing to meet the sea, breaking both its banks with a powerful current. They destroy their family. Prajāpati has declared all the faults of women."⁴ It is because of this reason that a woman is considered an evil and of a low mentality. Thus Yudhiṣṭhira asked Bhiṣma, "O best of the Bharatas, grand-father, I want to know the real nature of women because they lie at the root of all evil and are called low."⁵ Bhiṣma, in reply, narrated the dialogue between the sage Nārada and Pañcacūdā. Pañcacūdā, a prostitute herself, gave the darkest description of the wiles of womanhood. She said, "O Nārada, even women of good family, married to a good husband, do not stay within their limit. There is nobody more sinful than a woman. They are the origin of all faults. They do not wait for their husbands even if they be famous and prosperous but unite with others whenever they get a chance. Women desire only those men who flatter and obey them. The reason why some women remain under the control of their husbands is that either they do not attract any lover or they are afraid. They are ever ready to enjoy coitus irrespective of their age. What they want is a man—whether handsome or ugly."⁶ She went further and compared the insatiable nature of women with the fire, "Just as a fire is never satisfied by wood or an ocean is never filled up by rivers, or death is never satiated in his hunger, so are women never satiated even when they come in contact with very many men."⁷ Describing the fatal charm of women she said, "All the fatality

⁴ Mbh., XIII, 19, 91-94 (Bom. Ed.)

⁵ Mbh., XIII, 38, 1 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶ Mbh., XIII, 38, 11-18 ff (Bom. Ed.); Cf. Rāmāyaṇa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, 45 29-33; Yuddhakāṇḍa, 16, 9.

⁷ Mbh., XIII, 38, 24 (Bom. Ed.)

that is individually possessed by such as time (*kāla*), wind, death, netherworld (*pātāla*), the submarine fire (*vadavāgni*), the sharp edge of a sword, poison, a serpent and a fire—is possessed in collective form by the woman.”⁸

This peculiarity of woman's nature is explained by a legend. In old days everybody followed *dharma* and attained divinity. So gods were frightened and sought the refuge of Brahmā. Brahmā then created witches in the form of women, to seduce men. Women who were good till then became bad thereafter, when Brahmā gave them unsatiable lust, that they may seduce men. He also produced anger to help the seduction and all the created beings lost themselves to women, subjugated by lust and anger.⁹ Only supernatural powers on the part of a man could keep women in control. And a long legend is narrated about how Vipula protected his preceptor's wife from the amorous advances of Indra, by supernatural powers (*yoga*) acquired through austerities.¹⁰

The insatiable lust of women is clearly over-emphasised and the explanation given for the inherent wickedness of the woman's nature is not only irrational but absurd. It is quite possible that this exaggerated picture of women's sexual appetite was drawn partly to run down the woman and partly to apportion the blame of the looseness of growing sex-morbidness of this period on women.¹¹

Of course, men are to be equally blamed in this respect but the Epic tries to take off the burden of the blame from men's shoulders by emphasising that in a coitus a woman always derives more pleasure than a man, and that is why she is a greater culprit. A very strange legend is narrated to drive this point home. It describes how a king Bhaṅgāsavana was transformed into a woman due to the curse of Indra. As a woman she married a brahmin and begot hundred sons. Later Indra was pleased with him and when he asked whether he wanted to be his original self, he refused, saying, “A woman enjoys the coitus more than a man. So, O Śakra, I want to remain a woman, because I am satisfied with my womanhood.”¹²

⁸ Mbh., XIII, 38, 29-30 (Bom. Ed.)

⁹ Mbh., XIII, 40, 6-11. (Bom. Ed.)

¹⁰ Mbh., XIII, 40, 14 FF (Bom. Ed.)

¹¹ K. M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India*, p. 167.

¹² Mbh., XIII, 12 (Bom. Ed.)

The other disqualification for a woman rather magnified in the Epics is her unwarranted curiosity. The Rāmāyaṇa narrates a story perhaps fabricated to explain away the inherent meanness of Kaikeyī's nature. As the episode reads, Kaikeyī's father had a boon from a great sage by the power of which he could understand the language of all creatures. Once in his bed-chamber, he heard a bird chirping something and could not restrain smiling. His queen became very curious and asked the reason of his sudden smile. But the king was bound by a promise not to use his gift for others, and if he were to do so death would overtake him. He told this to his queen, who however, a woman as she was, would prefer her husband's death to the satisfaction of her curiosity. The king on the advice of a sage, did not yield to her demand and drove out the queen.¹³ We also find Yudhiṣṭhira cursing his mother because of the ill-treatment she gave to Karna: "From now onwards, no woman will be able to keep a secret."¹⁴ Yudhiṣṭhira cursed all the women of the world for the folly of his mother and this womanly reputation of her inability to keep a secret has come to us till modern days so as to form catechisms like "The easiest way to spread news is to telegram, telephone and tell-a-woman."

All these legends piling accusations on women, though rather amusing to our modern mentality, show what opinion of women the compilers of the Epics held. The general opinion about women was that they were frivolous, untrustworthy and apt to succumb to sexual pleasure. And this opinion has served well to impose social disabilities on women. The alleged frivolity of women and the new code of sex-ethics deprived them of any right to act independently of men. This also had its repercussions on the marriage age of a girl.

These allegations, apart from casting slur on the character of women, curtailed the religious and educational rights of women during this period. The Epic declares that the religious rights of women were curtailed due to the inherent blemish in their nature. "It is declared by the *śāstras* that women are embodiments of falsehood, and void of intellect; as such they have no right to perform religious ceremonies. Lord Prajāpati has reserved bed, ornaments, food, drinks, *anārya* behaviour, bad speech, low menta-

¹³ Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 35, 18-26.

¹⁴ Mbh., XII, 6, 10.

lity and sexual pleasure for women.”¹⁵ Of course this opinion about women was not the only cause that led to the curtailment of women’s religious rights.

In spite of this opinion, instances of Draupadī, Sulabhā and Śāvitṛī stand out to show that women of royal families and some of the wives of sages took interest in learning and were well versed in the vedic lores. Draupadī—the spirited heroine of the Mahābhārata is shown so well versed in religious scriptures so as to be able to argue out her case with Yudhiṣṭhira who is an authority on *dharma*.¹⁶ She baffles even an intelligent and experienced statesman like Bhīṣma on minute points of *dharma*.¹⁷ Besides this the Epics record many unmarried women engaged in the ascetic practices. Sulabhā—the wandering ascetic of the upaniṣadic fame is referred to by the Mahābhārata.¹⁸ Another ascetic woman—the daughter of Śāṇḍilya, was so much advanced in austerities that she acquired supernatural powers to curse semi-divine creatures like Garuḍa, and a brahmin like Gālava.¹⁹ Such instances in the life of other women in the Epics may be quoted to show that the practice did not conform to the preaching. Not only that but the Rāmāyaṇa refers to Kauśalya and Sītā performing the sacred vedic rites which were later forbidden to women.²⁰ Śabarī, a *nisāda* woman, went to heaven, which she won by her ascetic practices.²¹

The later trend prohibiting a woman to learn the sacred lore and to perform sacred rites is reflected when in Gītā women are placed on par with the *śūdras*. It declares the new faith of *bhakti* as the surest way of salvation for these unprivileged beings.²² Of the various *saṁskāras* which made a person worthy of being called a twice-born, a girl was allowed to have only one *saṁskāra* performed viz. Marriage. An unmarried woman was thus regarded as a maiden devoid of initiation (*asaṁskṛtā kanyā*)²³. The Anuśāsana parva makes it a duty for the father to get his daughter married and included a

¹⁵ Mbh., XIII, 40, 12-13 (Bom. Ed.)

¹⁶ Mbh., III, 28 ff.

¹⁷ Mbh., II, 60, 7.

¹⁸ Mbh., XII, 308, 7.

¹⁹ Mbh., V, 3, 1-16.

²⁰ Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyakāṇḍa, 20, 14-15; 25, 1; Sundarakāṇḍa, 14, 49.

²¹ Rāmāyaṇa, Araṇyakāṇḍa, 74, 26; 75, 32-35.

²² Gītā, IX, 32.

²³ Mbh., IX, 52, 12.

person who did not fulfil this duty in the list of persons incurring the sin of brahmanicide.²⁴ The reason of this haste on the part of the father to get his daughter married is well reflected in Kaṇva's advice to Śakuntalā. "It does not befit a woman to stay in the house of her relatives, thereby she lowers her fame, chastity and character. . . ."²⁵ Sāvitrī's father echoed the same sentiment when he failed to find a suitable husband for Sāvitrī.²⁶

A legend in the Mahābhārata brings this out more vividly. The daughter of sage Kuṇigarga, preferred to remain unmarried and performed severe āusterities, following the footsteps of her father, even though she was sought in marriage by many young men. When she grew very old and weak she thought of dying. But sage Nārada, who happened to be there told her, "You are still unmarried and hence void of the *saṃskāras* and so in spite of all the religious merit acquired by your severe austerities you will not be able to attain heaven." The old lady decided to get married and declared that she would share half of her religious merit with the person who was ready to marry her. An ascetic called Śṛṅgavān agreed to marry her on the condition that he would stay with her only for one night. The marriage was settled on that condition and the marriage ceremony was duly performed. When the night approached, the old lady by her supernatural power was transformed into a young maiden of incomparable beauty, properly adorned with ornaments, fine clothes and perfume. The sage was rather happy to stay with her not only for one but more than one night, but the ascetic woman left her body on the very next day, as it was settled, and attained heaven.²⁷

The new code of sex-ethics prescribed faithfulness and service to one's husband as the only duty of a wife. The Mahābhārata declares, "There is no sacrificial activity for a woman, no accessible worship for her; neither is there any vows or fasting prescribed for her. Her only *dharma* is to serve her husband. She can attain heaven by following that *dharma*."²⁸ As a result marriage was the

²⁴ Mbh., XIII, 24, 9 (Bom. Ed.); Manu, IX, 90.

²⁵ Mbh., I, 68, 11.

²⁶ Mbh., III, 277, 32-36; X, 44, 4 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁷ Mbh., IX, 52 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁸ Mbh., XIII, 46, 13 (Bom. Ed.); also Cf. Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 24, 27; 29, 18; Manu, V, 155.

only salvation for a woman.

The concept of virginity as an essential qualification of a bride, and the theory that marriage was the only *samskāra* to be performed on a girl, and if she died without getting married she would die without any sacrament being performed upon her (*asamskrītā*) conduced to early marriages. In course of time it became a fashion of the 'élites' to get their daughters married in a worthy family at an early age. The position of the fathers of a grown up daughter was very uncomfortable because the father incurred the sin of killing a brahmin if his daughter remained unmarried after the appearance of the menstrual period and her birth is consequently a misery²⁹. The daughters were aware of the fact and understood the grief they caused to their parents. It is interesting that the Epic writer makes even a daughter say: "A son is one's own self, a wife is a friend, while a daughter is a misery."³⁰ In spite of this there is evidence that the daughter was affectionately treated and well tended by everybody in the house, and was loved and cherished by all the members of the family. Draupadī draws a sweet picture of a happy home, where children were adored irrespective of sex. She said, "When I was a mere child, I used to sit in my father's lap when he was discussing religious and philosophical problems with brahmins, and listen to them attentively"³¹. That the only daughter of a father, Devayāni, for instance, was spoiled so much as to make her father behave according to her will, bears out that even female children were brought up with tenderness and affection.³²

One of the reasons for this is to be found in the address of the brahmin of Ekakrā who would not allow his daughter to offer herself a prey to *rāksasa* Bakāsura. He says: "Some people believe that a man loves his sons more than a daughter, but to me

²⁹ Cf. Mātali's vain efforts to search a suitable husband for a daughter and his cursing the lot of a father on his failure to get it.

(Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, 9, 10-11; also Cf. Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 119, 35).

³⁰ Mbh., I, 147, 11.

³¹ Mbh., III, 33, 56-58.

³² She insisted on imparting the *sanjīvanī vidyā* (the art of reviving the dead) to her father's rival's son; she made the daughter of Vṛṣaparvā who insulted her, a maid-servant through the influence of her father, and punished her own husband for being faithless to her, through the agency of her father. (Mbh., I, 71 onwards).

both are the same. How can I give away this daughter of mine, who is a deposit in my house, and whose son will release me and my ancestors from the hells?"³³.

The belief that a daughter's son would lead his maternal ancestors to a special meritorious region emphasised the necessity of having at least one daughter. Thus Gāndhārī requested Vyāsa to give her a daughter. "I would be much satisfied, if I shall get a daughter, besides these hundred sons. Then my husband shall acquire that heaven, which is available to those who have got a daughter's son. Moreover, it is said that a son-in-law is very dear to a woman. So if I have spoken truth, practised *dharma*, tended the sacred fire, and satisfied the elders, let a daughter be born to me."³⁴

It can be concluded from the many episodes in the Epics that only the guardian of the girl could bestow her away in marriage. As already noted, both Kuntī and Matsyagandhā when approached for coitus, declared themselves to be under the protection of their father and unable to consent to the demands without their parents' consent. Matsyagandhā openly declared that her father would not admit her in his house if she lost her virginity. An episode in the Rāmāyaṇa³⁵ further shows how far the daughters themselves abide to this restriction which was a firmly rooted social custom. King Kuśanābha had hundred beautiful daughters. Once while they were playing in the garden, the wind god chanced to see them and fell in love with them. He proposed to all the girls simultaneously, "I love you all, so be my wives. This youth is shortlived and it is especially so with human beings. So if you marry me, all of you would acquire eternal youth." But the daughters of Kuśanābha refused the proposal saying, "How can we overrule the desire of our father, who is always true in his speech, by contracting a choice-marriage? Our father is our lord and he to whomsoever he gives us, shall be our husband." On hearing this reply the wind god became very angry and transformed all the girls into hunch-backed ones.

Here it is seen that the daughters of Kuśanābha followed the conventional pattern of obeying their father even at the cost of incurring a curse upon themselves, whereas Kuntī and Matsya-

³³ Mbh., I, 145, 35-37.

³⁴ Mbh., I, 116 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁵ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 32, 18-23.

gandhā had yielded to the suitors being afraid of a curse. The absolute authority of the father over the daughter's person is further reflected in the disposal of Mādhavī—noted elsewhere, by her father king Yayāti as a gift to a brahmin, who in turn sold her in return for horses. This was so much ingrained in the cultural life of people that sage Aṣṭāvakra refused the proposal of Diśā on the ground that she was not independent to offer herself,³⁶ and so did Yayāti at the time of his marriage with Devayāni without her father's consent.³⁷

The different modes of marriage as enlisted and recorded by the Epics similarly indicate a preference for those modes in which the bride is bestowed on a person selected by her father as a gift by him. Only these marriages, the *brāhma*, *daiva* and *prājāpatya* are considered *dharmya*—valid for higher *varṇas* like the brahmins and the *ksatriyas*—in which the bride was bestowed as a gift. The other modes of marriages, in which marriage is forcibly brought about (*rāksasa* and *piśāca*); or is a purchase (*ārśa*), and even one in which the partners choose to marry one another (*gāndharva*) are ruled out as unworthy of the élite.³⁸

In spite of these other modes of marriage are found in the Epic times. The *rāksasa* mode of marriage is so frequent among the *ksatriya* class that some portions of the Epics permit it for the *ksatriyas*.³⁹ The most outstanding examples of the *rāksasa* form of marriage are the marriage of Arjuna with Subhadrā,⁴⁰ and that of the daughters of the king of Kāśī with Bhiṣma's brother.⁴¹ Bride-purchase was also practised by royal houses.⁴² It means that the *ksatriyas* had not given up the old modes of marriage even when the brahmins insisted on particular modes of marriage as valid and desirable.

The brahmins on their part restricted themselves to the *dharmya* modes of marriages. Jaratkāru married the sister of the serpent

³⁶ Mbh., XIII, 20, 19 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁷ Mbh., I, 76, 25.

³⁸ Mbh., I, 67, 8-14; I, 96, 8-11; XIII, 44, 4-10 (Bom. Ed.); also Cf. Manu, III, 21-26.

³⁹ Mbh., XIII, 45, 22 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁰ Mbh., I, 211, ff.

⁴¹ Mbh., I, 93, 3-13; also Cf. Mbh., VII, 5, 144; I, 90, 16, 85, 86; XII, 4 ff.

⁴² Mbh., III, 115, 11; V, 113, 13.

king Vāsuki, of the same name according to the *daiva* form of marriage wherein the bride is decorated with ornaments and bestowed as a gift to a brahmin guest.⁴³ So is Sukanyā bestowed upon Cyavana,⁴⁴ and Lopāmudrā upon Agatsya.⁴⁵ Even princess Śāntā was bestowed upon the sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga according to the *brāhma* mode of marriage.⁴⁶ In all these instances of marriage of brahmin sages with *ksatriya* princesses the rule of the brahmins was followed, and not of the *ksatriya* even when marriages were brought about through some kind of pressure. The concept of marriage as a gift of a daughter by a guardian still survives in Hindu marriage the important ceremony of which is *kanyā-dāna*, the gift of the bride who is decorated.

It may be laid down that the Epics mark a transition, from the earlier practice of bride-purchase and bride-capture to the custom of bestowing the bride as a gift without any return. This transition may be considered an ethical advance in the sphere of marriage⁴⁷ but in relation to the status of women, it restricts the choice and denies her personality. The parental authority is more emphasised. Secondly, whatever the form according to which the marriage is contracted, once the marriage ceremony is over the marriage is sanctified.

Marriage did not alter the status of a woman in any way. If formerly she was under the domination of her father, the domination was now changed in favour of her husband. The concept of *pāṭivratya* emphasises and strengthens the domination of the husband.

Though theoretically a slave of her husband's will, the position of the housewife was rooted in the love of her husband and so most of the housewives enjoyed complete freedom as regards the management of the house and some women like Draupadī and Kuntī who possessed strong will power wielded considerable influence over their husbands. The Epic always advises men to respect and love a woman and to keep her pleased by bestowing gifts, because on her depended the peace and happiness of the house and also the

⁴³ Mbh., I, 13, 34 and 36.

⁴⁴ Mbh., III, 122, 1-24.

⁴⁵ Mbh., III, 95, 1-7.

⁴⁶ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 10, 32.

⁴⁷ L. T. Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution*, p. 188.

continuation of the family.⁴⁸

The reason behind this adoration of wifehood was that she was a person who could continue the family line. As the Epic declares, "Even a great sage cannot produce a son without a woman, so a wife who is the mother of a son should be respected like one's own mother. The husband himself is born in his wife. A wife pleases a husband suffering from disease, or mental agony, just as water pleases a thirsty man. Sexual enjoyment, love and religion are all subject to a woman; so a person, even if angry, should not insult his wife."⁴⁹ The wife was thus loved for physical comfort, mental happiness, religion and continuity of the family; that is why respect was shown only to a fertile woman—the fate of a barren wife being much different. The *smṛtis* go to the length of permitting supersession of a wife, who is either barren or gives birth only to female children.⁵⁰

A woman commanded the highest respect and worship as a mother. The respect that Kuntī commanded from her valiant sons, and the devotion that is shown to Gāndhārī as reflected in the tolerance with which her bitter words are heard by the haughty Duryodhana show that the mother was respected not only in theory but in practice. Brahmā himself stresses the importance of the mother when he says that the curse of the mother could never even be nullified, because she is the greatest among all created beings.⁵¹

A mother's wish was a command to her son. Garuḍa faced all sorts of difficulties and hardships to release his mother from bondage.⁵² Karna granted a boon to Kuntī—even when treated by her in the most unjustifiable manner,⁵³ because after all she happened to be his mother. Cīrakārika placed the mother above the father, when the question of fulfilling his father's command to kill his mother arose. The exceptional case of Paraśurāma, killing his mother at his father's command, strikes as an exception to the general rule; but no sooner was the father pleased by the obedience of his son than Paraśurāma asked for reviving his mother's life.

⁴⁸ Mbh., XIII, 46, 3-12 (Bom. Ed.); I, 68, 51.

⁴⁹ Mbh., I, 68, 37 ff, also Cf. XII, 142, 4 ff.

⁵⁰ Cf. Yājñavalkya, I, 70; Nārada XII, 91-92; Manu, VIII, 374, -85, 366-67 (Adultery); 94 (barrenness); IX, 81.

⁵¹ Mbh., I, 33, 4.

⁵² Mbh., I, 28 ff.

⁵³ Mbh., V, 144, 22.

The Epic eulogy of the mother is in harmony with this practice: "There is no shelter like the mother's lap, there is no protection like the mother." "From the point of view of *dharma* one *upādhyāya* is better than ten *ācāryas*, one father better than ten *upādhyāyas* and a mother is better than ten such fathers. She is even greater than the earth."⁵⁴

Even with this advocacy of love and respect for the woman, the important fact stands out that woman's subjugation to her male guardian is the ideal of the Epics. It says, "God Prajāpati himself has declared his opinion that there is no independence for a woman, for them is destined the state of dependence."⁵⁵ She is protected by the father in her childhood, the husband in her youth and by the son in her old age."⁵⁶ Manu declares woman as completely without property, what belongs to her, belongs to her master.⁵⁷ This rule is confirmed by the evidence of the Epic wherein we find not a single woman inheriting her father's property. Among the *smṛti* writers, the wife's right to succeed to her deceased husband's estate was acknowledged first by Yājñavalkya. He recognises both the widow and the daughter as preferential heirs. Viṣṇu, Nārada and Bṛhaspati follow him.⁵⁸

While the woman's right to property was a questionable issue, a separate category of property constituting woman's property (*stridhana*) was recognised by all the law writers. Manu (IX, 193) describes as *stridhana* the ornaments and gifts given to a woman by her parents and brothers at the time of marriage and after marriage, including the gifts given to her by her husband as token of love. The Epic evidence shows that the royal princesses got a very big dowry at the time of marriage. The instances of Draupadī, Uttarā⁵⁹ and Sitā show that besides jewellery it consisted of horses, elephants, chariots, slaves and many other valuable articles. Moreover it must have been customary to present the new

⁵⁴ Mbh., XII, 258, 23 ff.

⁵⁵ Mbh., XIII, 20, 14; 46, 45-46-48 (Bom. Ed.) Cf. Manu, IX, 3; V, 48; Yājñavalkya, I, 85.

⁵⁶ Mbh., XIII, 20, 21; 46, 14 (Bom. Ed.); Baudhāyana, II, 3, 44, 45; Gautama, XVIII, 1.

⁵⁷ Manu, VIII, 416.

⁵⁸ P. V. Kane, History of the Dharmaśāstras, Vol. III, pp. 701-2; Cf. Yājñavalkya, II, 135-36; Viṣṇu XVII, 48.

⁵⁹ Mbh., I, 191, 13-19; IV, 67, 35.

bride with jewels and ornaments when she was received at her in-law's place for the first time.⁶⁰ What belonged to the woman was inherited by her daughter.⁶¹

So far as the royal families were concerned, females were generally confined to home and their public appearance was not much expected. When Sītā went to the forest along with Rāmā and Lakṣmaṇa the people lamented: "This Sītā who was not formerly seen even by creatures soaring in the sky is now seen by people walking on the road."⁶² Similarly after the great battle of the Mahābhārata when the Kaurava queens appear on the battle field, lamenting for their dead husbands, the Epic writer declares: "Those queens whom even the gods could not see formerly are now seen by common people, after the death of their husbands."⁶³ Mandodarī also echoes the same sentiment in the Rāmāyaṇa.⁶⁴ Apart from such direct references there are indications that women of a higher stratum of society must have avoided public eyes. Thus after Rāvaṇa's defeat, when Sītā is brought before Rāma, Vibhīṣaṇa tries to drive away the common soldiers loitering about the place, but Rāma forbids him to do so, saying, "The public appearance of a woman does not spoil her in misery, in extraordinary circumstances, in war, in *svayamvara* and in marriage."⁶⁵

It is to be noted here that the system of seclusion of women is taken here for granted in normal conditions. Secondly, a sort of purdah—*avagunṭhana*—(covering) must have been adopted by the royal ladies while facing the general public, though not the high officials and ministers. The later portions of the Epic seem to extend this rule to common women also, who did not appear either to be confined to home or to have adopted purdah in public appearance. "That beautiful woman is truly a *pativrātā*, whose face is not seen by anybody but her husband, not even the sun, the moon or the trees with a name in male gender."⁶⁶

In spite of all these handicaps women enjoyed certain privileges—they being the weaker sex. They were enlisted as those who could

⁶⁰ Mbh., I, 192, 19-20.

⁶¹ Mbh., XIII, 47, 23-26 (Bom. Ed.); Cf. Manu, IX, 198.

⁶² Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 338.

⁶³ Mbh., XI, 10, 8 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶⁴ Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, 111, 61.

⁶⁵ Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, 114, 28.

⁶⁶ Mbh., XIII, 144, 44 (Bom. Ed.)

not be killed. The whole of the Sanskrit literature considers women as *avadhyās* and the Epic confirms the fact.⁶⁷ Similarly a woman was not to be treated cruelly. The insulting attitude of the Kauravas towards Draupadī in the gambling hall is censured.⁶⁸ Hanumāna also scolded Rāvaṇa when he dragged the artificial Sītā by her hair in order to confuse Rāma. He described Rāvaṇa's behaviour as not befitting an Aryan.⁶⁹ But the fact, that both the heroines of the Epics have to undergo such treatment, shows that the rule of considering women as *avadhyās* was not followed and women had to suffer insults very often.

If judged from the point of view enunciated above women of the Epic age did not enjoy a high social status. In the Epics, "Woman is only a chattel, her good points or her defects have their meaning and being only with reference to the man—to his sexual pleasure, his feeling of power and his vanity."⁷⁰ And in spite of the intelligence and brilliance that some of the woman characters of the Epics show, the social ideal demanded that they should be subservient to the will and whims of man to be the happiest and ideal women of the age.

⁶⁷ Mbh., I, 158, 31; 155, 2; 217, 4; II, 41, 13; 138, 14; III, 206, 46. Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 25, 17; 26, 12.

⁶⁸ Mbh., II, 61, 42; also Cf. VIII, 16.

⁶⁹ Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, 8, 17-22.

⁷⁰ E. W. Hopkins, The Position of the Ruling Caste in Ancient India, J.A.O.S., 1897.

CHAPTER VIII

VARṆA SYSTEM

The Epics deal with the *varṇas* and not castes. Evidently the stratification of the society then was less complex than that of the modern one. Yet in the final recast of the Mahābhārata, the *varṇa* system is found to be almost rigid with a regularly established social hierarchy formed on the basis of birth. 'The Epics, in agreement with the other Hindu religious literature, accept the divine origin of the *varṇa* stratification, but conscious of the injustice involved in such a stratification, formed merely on the ground of birth, they soon try to justify it, on other considerations. It remains for us to examine the nature of complexity of the *varṇa* stratification reflected by the Epics and the reasons advanced in support of this stratification.'

Traditionally the *varṇa* system has been explained as created by the divine Creator along with the functions allotted to the four *varṇas*, according to the association of place of origin of each with the various limbs of the Creator. The earliest reference to this origin of *varṇa* is in a later hymn of the R̥gveda, the Puruṣa-sūkta¹, which refers to the four orders of society as emanating from the sacrifice of the Primordial Being. The names of these four orders enumerated there are the *brāhmaṇa*, the *rājanya*, the *vaiśya* and the *śūdra* and they are said to have come from the mouth, the arms, the thighs and the feet of the Creator. "The particular limbs ascribed as the origin of three divisions and the order in which they are mentioned, probably indicate their status in the society of the time, though no such interpretation is directly given . . . It is the Taittiriya saṃhitā that ascribes the origin of these four classes to the four limbs of the Creator and adds an explanation, viz., the brahmins are declared to be the chief because they were created from the mouth—punning on the word *mukha*; the *rājanyas* are vigorous because they were created from vigour. The *vaiśyas* are meant

¹ R̥gveda, X, 90, 2—The *Brāhmaṇa* was his (*Puruṣa*'s) mouth; the *rājanya* was made from his arms; the being (called) the *vaiśya*, he was his thighs; the *śūdra* sprang from his feet.

to be eaten, referring to their liability to excessive taxation, because they were created from the stomach—the receptacle of food; the *śūdra* because he was created from the feet, is to be the transporter of others and subsist by his feet.”² It is here that for the first time a divine justification is offered for the functions and status of these orders.

The Mahābhārata accepts this basis—with the only difference that Brahmā or Prajāpati is accepted as the originator of the *varṇa* division in the dialogue between god Wind and king Aila. “From the mouth of Brahmā were born the brahmins. From the arms were created the *ksatriyas*, and the *vaiśyas* are told to have been born out of thighs. And to serve the three *varṇas*, O best of the men! the *śūdras* were born out of his feet.”³ The great Puruṣa is also identified with Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu as the originator of the four *varṇas*. Thus often in the Epics sectarianism was utilised to perpetuate the concept of the divine origin of the *varṇa*.⁴

The traditional theory of the divine origin of the *varṇa* system is nowadays often interpreted in the light of the modern idea of an organic theory of society.⁵ The four *varṇas* were the four organs of society. Each of these *varṇas* was designed to possess a particular function in society, so as to fulfil its obligation in the best possible way. The privileges granted to certain *varṇas* were but facilities provided to them to fulfil their obligations in the best possible manner. And the joint effort of all the *varṇas* led towards a “constructive contribution to the social well-being.”

For the validity of this interpretation of the *varṇa* system, two conditions must be satisfied. Firstly, in a true functional society, an individual has his or her own choice of occupation according to his or her aptitude and ability. Secondly, if society was to be a single organism kept in equilibrium by the proper division of labour amongst the four orders constituting it, all the *varṇas*, whatever their functions may be, must have equal status in society and all functions must be regarded as equally good.

² G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India*, pp. 40-41.

³ Mbh., XII, 73, 4-5; also cf. VIII, 23, 32; X, 3, 18-20 (Bom. Ed.); XIII, 48, 3 (Bom. Ed.); Manu, I, 87-93.

⁴ Mbh., XII, 47, 43; XII, 200, 31-33; Gītā, IV, 13.

⁵ P. H. Valavalkar, *Hindu Social Institutions*, p. 327.

N. A. Thoothi, *Vaiṣṇavas of Gujerat*, p. 121.

V. R. R. Dixitar, *Hindu Administrative Institutions*, p. 38.

In the *varṇa* theory, however, the functions of the four orders are ordained by the Creator along with their birth. The discourse of god Wind to king Aila gives also their functions as ordained by Brahmā. It says: "Brahmins by birth are in charge of *dharma* of all the creatures of society. He (Brahmā) created the second *varṇa* of *ksatriyas* to protect the world. The *vaiśyas* also supported the other three *varṇas* by wealth and food; and it was ordained by Brahmā that the *śūdras* should serve all these."⁶ Thus the pattern of behaviour of the individuals born in different *varṇas*, is pre-ordained. Secondly, a social hierarchy with the brahmins at the topmost pinnacle and the *śūdras* at the lowest rung is the keynote of the Epics.

Even in the vedic society the differentiation both in point of function and status is quite evident. In the later vedic period special rules were prescribed for the guidance of the different *varṇas* which tended, by making different classes conform to different habits, rules of etiquette etc., to widen the gulf between the different *varṇas*. The Śatapatha brāhmaṇa (XIII, 8, 3, 11) prescribes different sizes of funeral moulds for the four *varṇas* and lays down different modes for showing politeness to different groups (I, 1, 4, 12).⁷ Another most striking development was the inordinate extension of the pretensions and prerogatives of the sacerdotal class. Both the Taittirīya brāhmaṇa (I, 4, 4) and the Śatapatha brāhmaṇa (XII, 4, 4, 6) assign to brahmins a position, higher than the gods. The Atharvaveda (X, 18, 19) proclaims in the strongest language the sin, peril and ruinous consequences of insulting a brahmin and robbing him of property.⁸ A brahmin's priority in judicial matters is also granted, and the Taittirīya saṃhitā (II, 5, 11-12) advises the king to give him a preferential treatment, with regard to the other *varṇas*. The separation of the functions of different *varṇas*—especially the priestly function—is complete. The Aitareya brāhmaṇa (VIII, 24) proclaims: "The Gods do not eat the food offered by a king who has no priest." The kings lost the right even of appointing

⁶ Mbh., XII, 73, 5-8.

⁷ Also cf. Aitareya brāhmaṇa I, 5 where metres of Gāyatri for different *varṇas* are recommended; Taittirīya brāhmaṇa I, 1 recommends different seasons for the performance of sacrifice for different *varṇas*.

⁸ Cf. Atharvaveda, V, 17, 9.

and dismissing his priest at will.⁹ Thus the supremacy of the brahmin is not only theoretically propounded but is also strengthened by conferring on him certain privileges.

Thus the functional interpretation of the traditional theory is not quite satisfactory. On the contrary, it goes far to prove that the whole system is a superimposed structure on the society, justified theologically. Lord Kṛṣṇa declares it his duty to perpetuate the system of *varṇa*. He says to Arjuna: "O Pārtha, there is nothing left for me in this world as my duty, nor is there any achievement left for me. Even then I go on performing my duties. If I, unfatigueable in the performance of duty, do not behave so, then, O Pārtha, human beings would follow my footsteps, the world would be destroyed and whatever mixture of *varṇa* would arise, would be due to me."¹⁰

Colour is introduced as another basis of the *varṇa* stratification in the Mahābhārata. In a dialogue¹¹ between the sages Bhṛgu and Bharadvāja the former declares: "He (Brahmā) created the brahmins, the *ksatriyas*, the *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* and also the other groups of creatures. The colour of the brahmin was white, of the *ksatriya* red, of the *vaiśya* yellow and of the *śūdra* black." But Bharadvāja raises a doubt against this basis of *varṇa* stratification saying: "If the *varṇas* are divided on the basis of colour, there is intermixture of colours in almost every *varṇa*. Moreover, which *varṇa* is not overpowered by lust, anger, greediness and sorrow? Everybody is wearing away due to perspiration, urine, cough and blood. Then, on what basis are these *varṇa* distinctions based? Moreover there are various types of animate as well as inanimate objects of different colours. Out of these how could *varṇa* be detected?" Bhṛgu, confronted by this argument, at once shifts his ground and declares: "There is no particular *varṇa*. This world was created as brahmin first by Brahmā, but the division of *varṇa* arose due to their different functions."

Thus the colour theory is expounded in the Epic but its propounder unable to maintain it, shifts immediately to the functional basis. Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas also expresses his doubts about considering colour as the basis of *varṇa* distinction.

⁹ N. K. Dutta, Origin and Growth of Caste in India, Vol. I, p. 90.

¹⁰ Gītā, III, 22-24.

¹¹ Mbh., XII, 181, 4-10.

He declares: "Men of all *varṇas* can produce children on women of all *varṇas* and hence all *varṇas* are, so to say, a mixture. It is consequently difficult to test the *varṇa* of an individual."¹²

An examination of the Epic data regarding unions between different *varṇas* analysed in Chapter IV reveals the following facts which do not hold up the colour theory of *varṇa*. Firstly, the brahmins were allowed to take wives from the three lower *varṇas*. Not only that, but brahmins as well as the *kṣatriyas*, which formed the aristocracy of the society, used to beget progeny on women of forest tribes like the *Nāgas* and the *Sarpas*. Secondly, though in theory the progeny of a *śūdra* wife was considered inferior, it has already been noted how, as a general rule, the children belonged to the father's *varṇa*. In the light of these facts, stratification of the *varṇas* on the basis of colour establishing the superiority of the brahmins on the ground of racial purity can hardly be maintained.

Karma is given as an alternative basis of *varṇa* stratification in the above quoted passage of *Bhṛgu*. Further elucidating his exposition of the emergence of *varṇa*, *Bhṛgu* declares: "There is no particular *varṇa*. This world was first created brahmin by *Brahmā*, but the division of *varṇas* sprang up due to their *karmas*. Those who possessed cupidity, were short-tempered and rash, and left their own *dharma* and were of red colour, became *kṣatriyas*. Those who took to cattle farming as occupation, were of a yellow hue and maintained themselves on agriculture, instead of following their own *dharma*, became *vaiśyas*. Those brahmins who were black, bereft of purity and were lovers of violence and falsehood and subsisted on all sorts of vocations, became *śūdras*. Thus these *dvijas* became different *varṇas* by following different occupations and by avoiding *dharma* and sacrificial ritual. These four *varṇas* evolved from the original brahmins, due to greed and ignorance. But the religious merit (*tapas*) of a brahmin who behaves according

¹² Mbh., III, 177, 25.

An interesting factor to be noted is that since brahmin as the most important *varṇa* is ascribed the white colour, it follows that white complexion would have been preferred to other shades. As opposed to this, not white, but the complexion like that of a blue lotus is a favourite shade with the Epic people. *Kṛṣṇa* is supposed to have such a complexion. *Arjuna* and *Nakula* both are supposed to have such a complexion, and are considered to be very handsome. *Draupadi* the heroine is also named *Kṛṣṇā* because of dark complexion and is yet described as most beautiful.

to *dharma* is never destroyed, because he keeps his vows regularly. Amongst those who are ignorant about Brahṁā's creation, many other *jātis* exist. *Piśācas*, *rāksasas*, *mlecchas* and *pretas* were those whose knowledge was destroyed and who behaved according to their own will."¹³ Similarly, elsewhere he maintains that: "If these characteristics are found in a *śūdra* and not found in a brahmin then that *śūdra* is not a *śūdra*, nor is that brahmin, a brahmin."¹⁴

In this passage dealing with classification of people, Bhṛgu provides another basis, viz., *karma* which he interprets as the nature of occupation selected by a person and secondly as the manifestation or absence of certain intellectual and ethical qualities reflected in a person's behaviour (*ācāra*). Side by side, he sticks to his original colour connotation of *varṇa*.

Bhṛgu is thus not clear in his classification and hence the whole theory is confused and unconvincing. The incongruity is apparent when we note that an individual's colour is not an outcome of a particular profession; neither does temperament nor selection of an occupation bear any relation to each other, much less to colour. He does not even bother to give all the three attributes, viz., occupation, colour and qualities of all the *varṇas*.

Bhṛgu, however, accepts the basic equality of all human beings—a viewpoint different from the traditional one, wherein the social status of a person is pre-ordained by the limb from which his group was supposed to have emanated. Secondly, he emphasises the *karma* basis and not the colour basis, because, as noted above, he maintains that only a brahmin following the proper functions of his *varṇa* is a real brahmin.

The position, then, is this. The Epic takes for granted the *varṇa* system. It also accepts the traditional theory of the divine origin. Yet the intellectual section of society along with the down-troddens must have found the whole thing unjust. The later authors of the Epic have, therefore, attempted to provide rational basis for the *varṇa* distinction, and we have to see now how far the functions and the qualities given as rational basis of the *varṇa* system are really the foundations of the system.

The author of the Gītā also tries to put the *varṇa* system on a valid basis by providing qualities (*guṇa*) and functions (*karma*)

¹³ Mbh., XII, 181, 10 ff.

¹⁴ Mbh., XII, 182, 8 also cf. XII, 60, 41.

as the basis of the original *varṇa* classification by the Creator. Lord Kṛṣṇa declares : "I have created the four *varṇas* according to the *guṇa* and *karma*."¹⁵ Following this basis of division, Gītā describes the qualities of the four *varṇas* as follows : "The inborn nature of a brahmin consists of forbearance, control, purity, peace and compassion along with vedic knowledge (*jñāna*) as well as the higher knowledge. The inherent nature of a *ksatriya* is bravery, strength, patience, cleverness, courage in the battlefield, giving gifts and godliness. The functions of a *vaiśya* inherent in his nature are agriculture and trade, while that of a *śūdra* is service."¹⁶ Here in the case of the two higher *varṇas* qualities are given, while in the case of the two lower *varṇas*, occupations are given. Thus 'karma' in Gītā may mean occupation as differentiated from its alternative meaning of behaviour (*ācāra*). The qualities and functions, thus, are confused as the basis of *varṇa*. Secondly, the ethical qualities which are usually individual traits are applied to a whole group, thus making them group traits. Thirdly, these traits are not to be developed by individual efforts but are inherent in an individual right from the beginning, according to his past deeds. If he behaved well in his past birth, he inherits superior ethical qualities and becomes a brahmin or vice versa.¹⁷ Fourthly, these *varṇa* traits inherited by an individual are so strong that even though he tries to subdue them to acquire the traits of another group, he would be unable to do so. Lord Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna : "Even though you do not want to do a particular action, you will be compelled to do it by your inherent nature."¹⁸ Gītā thus tries to shift the injustice involved in considering a human being superior to another, just due to an accident of birth, off the shoulders of the Divine Creator, and tries to justify it in the light of the theory of *karma*. Of course, this theory fails to explain how the individual at the very beginning of creation came to be possessed of particular qualities and capacities.¹⁹

We will take up the functional basis first and examine in the light of the Epic evidence, how far the occupations prescribed for the

¹⁵ Gītā, IV, 13.

¹⁶ Gītā, XVIII, 42-44.

¹⁷ Gītā, VI, 40-42; also cf. Mbh., III, 205, 22-29.

¹⁸ Gītā, XIII, 60; Manu, I, 28-30.

¹⁹ G. S. Ghurye, Ibid., pp. 61, 64.

brahmins and other *varṇas* were actually followed by them.

As for the occupations of different *varṇas*, the Epic declares that Brahmā has enjoined the six-fold functions of performance of sacrifice for one's own self and for others (*yajana* and *yājana*); giving of gifts as well as the acceptance of gifts (*dāna* and *pratigrahaṇa*); and study and teaching (*adhyayana* and *adhyāpana*), for a brahmin. Protection of society was entrusted to *ksatriyas*; trade, agriculture and cattle rearing were the occupations of a *vaiśya*; and service was the only mode of maintenance for a *śūdra*.²⁰

The six-fold occupations prescribed for brahmins are declared as divinely ordained and hence the test for a brahmin in an undeveloped society. But for a society in which numerous arts and crafts flourished, and trade was brisk between different cities through big caravans,²¹ this list of occupations is too simple. A long list of professions other than those traditionally prescribed for brahmins, is given in Śāntiparva.²² Not only that, but a brahmin is allowed to follow the occupations of the two lower *varṇa* groups if he could not maintain himself by his own.²³

The stories of Parāśurāma and Droṇa clearly show that brahmins took up the warrior's profession whenever occasion arose. Though the Epic version describes how their ancestors came and rebuked them for the slaughter they practised in the battle, they are not shown as being deprived of the privileges of brahmins.²⁴ And in spite of the apathy shown towards a brahmin wielding weapons, there are instances, where they are shown doing it successfully, and not only that but are even eulogised for that, if they had done so for a good cause. Agastya is said to have killed all the demons and restored the kingdom of heavens to god.²⁵ So does Vasiṣṭha who protects the sacrifice being performed by Āditya from the demons called Khalas whom even Indra could not conquer.²⁶ Whether we find in these stories some historical episodes or whether they are mere fabrications of the priestly class to impress the superiority of brahmins over the *ksatriyas* in wielding weapons cannot

²⁰ Mbh., XIII, 141, 47, 54, 55, 57, 67 (Bom. Ed.)

²¹ Mbh., III, 61, 106.

²² Mbh., XII, 79, 3-11.

²³ Mbh., XII, 79, 1-2.

²⁴ Mbh., XIV, 29, 22; VII, 190, 34; 186, 9-30; 192, 37-39.

²⁵ Mbh., XIII, 185 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁶ Mbh., XIII, 157 (Bom. Ed.)

be definitely said, because the attitude of the Rāmāyaṇa towards such brahmanic exploits is different. Paraśurāma—the great brahmin warrior is defeated by the *ksatriya* hero Rāma²⁷ and not only that but Viśvāmitra—a very powerful and mighty sage is shown seeking the assistance of the *ksatriya* princes Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to destroy the demons.²⁸

As opposed to this the Mahābhārata²⁹ refers to a brahmin named Gautama who loses his *varṇa* position for adopting the occupation of a hunter and for contracting marriage with a *śūdra* woman. Another brahmin who has preserved his *varṇa* position refuses to eat with him. Karna points out to a perfect mobility of occupations in the *vāhika* country remarking: “All *vāhikas* are brahmins first. Then they become *ksatriyas*, then *vaiśyas* and then *śūdras*. Again they become barbers and then again a brahmin. In a family only one person remains a brahmin and all others follow whatever profession they like. The *Gāndhāras*, the *Vāhikas* and *Madrakas* have little knowledge.”³⁰ This tradition is already in the bad eyes of the strict brahmanic code of behaviour and we have already noted how the above mentioned countries were notorious for their offending behaviour. Bhisma classifies the brahmins into four sub-castes according to the functions they adopt and the characteristics they manifest.³¹ “Those brahmins who have learnt all sciences and possess all the characteristics suitable to their *varṇa* and look upon everybody with tolerance, are called *brahma* brahmins, because they are like Brahmadeva. Those brahmins who are learned in the *vedas* and are attached to their six-fold duties are called *deva brāhmins*. But O King, those brahmins who renounce their actions incumbent upon them by birth, are misers, and are brahmins only in name, are *śūdra* brahmins. The king should tax such brahmins who are not learned and are fallen from their sacrificial activities (*agnihotra*) and should extract compulsory work from them. Those brahmins, who serve in the king’s court, or the court of justice as *dharmādhikārīs*, accept money for image worship,

²⁷ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 76, 9-12.

²⁸ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 19, 4-17.

²⁹ Mbh., XII, 162, 49, Note No. 435 (critical edition); XII, 168,52 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁰ Mbh., VIII, 45, 5-8 (Bom. Ed.)

³¹ Mbh., XII, 77, 2-9.

follow fortune-telling as a profession, perform sacrifices for the village to achieve certain motives, and collect taxes as government servants, are called *cāṇḍāla* brahmins. O King, those brahmins who work as messengers, *ṛtvija*, *purohita* or ministers are *ksatriya* brahmins. While, O King, those brahmins who maintain themselves as cavaliers, elephant riders, charioteers or simple soldiers are called *vaiśya* brahmins. When there is no money in the king's treasury, then such fallen brahmins should be taxed. Only the *deva* brahmin and the *brahmā* brahmin should not be taxed."

This dialogue clearly indicates that all the brahmins did not follow the six-fold professions, traditionally prescribed for them but went in for more lucrative professions followed by other members of the community. Moreover, all of them were not learned in vedic lore also, nor did they possess a high moral character that was required of them. And hence it is natural that those who reached the high standard were esteemed high in the public opinion, while those who could not reach that standard were looked down upon. Not only that but they lost the privileges of exemption from taxes. Similar passages are also found elsewhere in the Epic³² indicating thereby that such brahmins did not enjoy a very high social position. Yet one finds that though the brahmins are shown as degraded in their social position and are named *śūdra* brahmin, *vaiśya* brahmin etc. in view of the low occupations they followed, they are still addressed as 'brahmins' and not directly called by their trade names or by the name of the other *varṇas*, viz., *vaiśyas* or *śūdras*. This points to the emphasis on birth. Because they were born brahmins, they remained brahmins, irrespective of their occupation and it is not very clear how much they did lose even in political and social privileges accorded to the brahmins as a *varṇa*.

The various lists narrated in the Anuśāsanaparva³³ for brahmins unworthy of invitation for a *śrāddha* confirms the variety of occupations the brahmins followed and how far their social status was influenced thereby. Besides single verses here and there, the Anuśāsanaparva gives us two lists of such unworthy brahmins. "O Great King, a learned person should always examine a brahmin first as regards the excellence of their nobility, age, character,

³² Mbh., XII, 66, 3-11.

³³ Mbh., XIII, 90, 2-18 (Bom. Ed.)

looks, learning and family because amongst the brahmins some sanctify the rows (*pankti pāvana*) and some pollute the rows (*pankti dosaka*). Out of these, O King, listen about those who are *pankti dosakas*."

An analysis of the various causes that deprived brahmins of their social status as given in these lists, show that the taboos are based upon various reasons—the main theme being the mode of behaviour.

Mode of Behaviour:—A brahmin was automatically cancelled from the list of good brahmins, if he did not follow the proper *ācāra* as laid down by the traditional vedic religion. Thus the list proclaims that a brahmin is unworthy, who does not follow the various *śrauta* and *smārta dharma* and also one who did not perform the regular *sandhyāvandana*. Just as slackness in the *ācāra* was blamed, so was over-indulgence in it. And one who followed false vows and *vṛata* was also looked down upon.

Physical defects:—Lack of *ācāra* is generally mixed up with physical defects or diseased condition of the mind as well as body. And diseases like leucoderma, T.B., epilepsy etc. are mentioned as a blemish to brahminhood. It is clearly visible that this taboo must have arisen due to the fear of infection or the horrid appearance of the person who was diseased. An ethical reason for such taboo also is apparent when we recall the idea—as revealed in the vedic literature—of considering sickness as a punishment from gods.³⁴

Occupation:—The most emphasised factor in both the lists is the occupation that a brahmin follows. It is evident from the list what a variety of occupations were followed by the brahmins. Sometimes this fact was overlooked—as already noted. But certain professions were particularly forbidden for them either due to the religious taboo involved in it, as in selling the *soma* plant, and working as priests of the temple gods. Though teaching others was their most honoured profession, one who charged fees or who encouraged greediness on the part of a brahmin was condemned and looked down upon.³⁵ Some occupations—though honest in themselves—were condemned due to the loose behaviour and stigma of immorality attached to the members of such professions. Such were

³⁴ P. V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstras, Vol. IV, p. 5.

³⁵ It is seen that the Epic often notices fees charged to students in the form of *gurudakṣiṇā*—sometimes compulsorily and most unethically—as in the case of Eklavya.

the professions of singers, dancers, instrument players and narrators of fabricated stories. Money-lenders (not included in the list) were condemned due to the social stigma attached to them. Though in times of distress the professions of a warrior and a cattle rearer were allowed, nevertheless it is mentioned, that they are not honourable. Even for a *vaiśya* trader, there were taboos for dealing in some articles, as is obvious from the account of the articles which Tulādhara did not sell. (Mbh., XII, 262, 7-8, Bom. Ed.)

Family relationship was another reason for *varṇa* degradation. One who was ignorant of his ancestors, born of remarriage, adopted by his mother's father, married before the elder brother etc. is censured. The part played by sex morals in the *varṇa* position of a person is noteworthy. The husband of an adulterous woman is looked down upon. So is a henpecked one. So was one who transgressed the *varṇa* restrictions and married a *śūdra*, taught a *śūdra* or even performed sacrifice for a *śūdra*. Here is a specific relationship established between the lowest *varṇa* and the most superior *varṇa* according to which any sort of association between the two was censured and led to *varṇa* degradation on the part of the latter. Lack of social morality was another reason of *varṇa* degradation—hence a criminal lost his social position. Crime like betrayal of friendship and adultery—otherwise not punished by law—led to a social degradation.

The whole analysis shows that the reasons for *varṇa* degradation are various and are to be taken into consideration only when brahmins were to be invited as the representatives of gods or *pitṛs* at a religious ceremony. Only brahmins could function as priests at religious ceremonies and perhaps it is for this reason that the Epic has taken pains to give elaborate lists of brahmins only and not of other *varṇas*. Thus the so-called degradation that a brahmin suffered in his position was only a comparative lowering of the status as far as his own *varṇa* was concerned. Such a person must have been dropped down in preference to a person who followed the proper occupation or the proper code of behaviour. He still remained at the head of the social hierarchy as a brahmin by the right of his birth.

Secondly, reasons given for the comparative social degradation are so varied that occupation cannot be called the main reason of degradation from his *varṇa*.

An obvious brahmanic influence is noticeable in a later remark of the Epic where a liberality is shown towards the brahmins following professions other than their own.³⁶ It is mentioned that whatever profession a brahmin followed, if he followed *dharma* he was to be worshipped. Even the lapses which are enumerated as responsible for disqualifying a brahmin at a *śrāddha* are condoned. "That brahmin who has been cunning, has fallen from the vedic regulations, has been a thief, a seller of animals, and has accepted the profession of a trader, if he thereafter drinks "*soma*" is worthy of invitation."³⁷ Thus ultimately birth prevails.

We have seen so far brahmins going in for activities and occupations not meant for them. Likewise, the *ksatriyas* and the *vaiśyas*, too, are also found taking to the activities which are said to be the sole prerogatives of the brahmins. Many kings are found leading ascetic lives due to one reason or another, and sometimes only because of their own will. Not only *ksatriyas* like Bhiṣma—who preaches Yudhiṣṭhira the true nature of *dharma* and enlightens him on many knotty points in the Epic, but also *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* like Tulādhara and Dharmavyādha and Vidura (whose *varṇa* cannot be properly defined) are preachers of *dharma* even to the brahmins. Of course, it is not their regular profession. Similarly, Devāpi and Viśvāmitra are said to carry on the priestly function, viz., practising sacrifice, not only in the Epics but in other religious books also. It may be added that the Epic version allows them to function as priests only after a change of *varṇa*, which necessarily means that the mobility which once prevailed came to be restricted and the brahmin monopoly came to be fully asserted by the time of the last version of the Mahābhārata.

The Anuśāsanaparva allows a person to follow the occupations of two higher *varṇas*. In a dialogue between Umā and Maheśvara, the lord expounding the *varṇa dharma* says: "That *ksatriya* or *vaiśya*, who performs the functions (*dharma*) of a brahmin and supports brahminhood, can attain it; while that brahmin, who leaves his own brahminhood and performs the functions of a *ksatriya*, is born as a *ksatriya* and falls from brahminhood."³⁸ Here not only a lower *varṇa* individual is allowed to practise the *dharma*

³⁶ Mbh., XIII, 33, 10-14 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁷ Mbh., XIII, 90, 30 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁸ Mbh., XIII, 143, 8-9 (Bom. Ed.), also cf. XII, 283, 4-5.

of a higher *varṇa*, but is said to reap its good fruits. But that is only in the next birth and not in the present one.

Let us now proceed to the consideration of the *guṇa* basis of the *varṇa* classification. In the Epic we find two interpretations of the term *guṇa*. Firstly, the discussion about *guṇa* is carried on with reference to the three primary ingredients of *prakṛti*, viz. *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, which are manifested in all created beings in varied proportions. *Guṇas* are alternatively interpreted as representing various qualities, manifested in behaviour (*ācāra*).

As noted above, when the colour connotation was not found to be a sufficient index to *varṇa* stratification, another fact, viz. the qualities (*guṇas*) were utilised as an index to *varṇa* classification and in jumping over from one to the other, both came to be associated so that *sattva guṇa* is represented as white in colour, *rajas* as red and *tamas* as dark, while a mixture of *rajas* and *tamas* was yellow in colour. These colours representing the various *guṇas* were further identified with the *varṇas*. Thus brahmins were of a *sāttvika* temperament and hence white in colour; *ksatriyas* of a *rājasa* temperament, hence red in colour; *vaiśyas* were yellow and represented a combination of *rajas* and *tamas*; while the *śūdras*, who were temperamentally *tāmsika* were of a black hue.

The identification of colour with qualities is carried out by Sanat-kumara in a passage in the Mahābhārata.³⁹ In a discourse he says: "It is established by the proof of the *śāstras* that in this universe, there are creatures of six different colours, viz. black, grey, blue, red, yellow and white. Those who possess the *rajas guṇa* in equilibrium, are black creatures. Know those creatures to be grey, who possess the *sattva guṇa* in equilibrium, lack the *rajas guṇa* and excel in the *tamas guṇa*. Those who possess a greater degree of *rajas guṇa*, lack *sattva guṇa* and possess an equilibrium of *tamas* are blue. Those who possess *rajas guṇa* overwhelmingly, an equilibrium of *sattva* and lack the *tamas guṇa* are of a red colour. Those creatures are always active minded, lack ignorance and are brave. Again, those who possess *sattva guṇa* in excess, an equilibrium of the *tamas guṇa* and lack the *rajas guṇa* are of yellow colour. These creatures are mostly happy, while those who possess *sattva* in abund-

³⁹ Mbh., XII, 280, 33 onwards (Bom. Ed.) Cf. 271, 33 onwards (Critical Ed.) The latter does not expound the theory in details as in the Bombay Edition, but gives only the names of the colours.

ance, lack *tamas* and possess an equilibrium of *rajas*, are of a white colour and very happy."

Nilakanṭha explains this rather obscure passage by a simile of three sticks, viz. just as three sticks supported by each other can stand, so do the three *guṇas* of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* which are found in the mental get-up of all creatures; and different types of combination of these three in different degrees lead to the differences in the nature of creatures. Then he explains that the black creatures are inanimate objects like trees etc. Grey objects are birds and animals; blue objects are human beings; the *Prajāpatis* being the red ones, while gods are yellow and the liberated souls white.

Here the reference obviously is to the different proportions that the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti* assume at the time of creation. Though the qualities of red as well as white are described, the analogy is not further extended to the *varṇa* system. Gītā⁴⁰ also discusses the three *guṇa* theory on individual basis and does not make any reference to *varṇa* system as associated with it. Any individual who achieves a perfect equilibrium of these three qualities can be a *triguṇātīta*. (One who has mastered the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti*). The emphasis that Bhṛgu makes on temperamental qualities representing *ksatriyas* as of cruel nature, rash, short-tempered and passionate and *śūdras* as violent and of false speech making them group traits instead of individual characteristics, might have led to this further identification of colour and quality with respect to *varṇas* which is supported by later literature. Another thing to be noted here is the fact that yellow colour stands higher compared to the red one, while in the social hierarchy the *ksatriyas* representing a red colour were definitely in a superior position with regard to *vaiśyas* represented by a yellow hue.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Gītā, XIV, 5-20 and 22-27; also cf. Gītā, XVII.

⁴¹ Mess believes that in the above passage, "colour is a symbol of inherent qualities of nature. The *sattva guṇa* is represented as being white, it stands for harmony, purity, goodness, equilibrium, light and wisdom, and since it was associated with the brahmins that particular *varṇa* might have been called of white colour. The *rajoguṇa* is represented as red. It stands for activity and passion. It was associated with the *ksatriyas* and hence the *ksatriya varṇa* may have been called the red *varṇa*. The third *varṇa* of the *vaiśyas* was called yellow. Associated with it is a mixture of the two lower *guṇas*, black and red. The fourth *varṇa* was quite *tāmsika* and the persons

The Mahābhārata elsewhere also propounds a theory wherein the *ācāra* or the behaviour of a person is the basis of *varṇa* distinction. In the famous dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and the serpent the latter asks: "Who is called a brahmin?" Yudhiṣṭhira replies: "Know him to be a brahmin, O best of the serpents, who is truthful, charitable, forgiving, gentle, soft, merciful and who behaves according to *dharma*." The serpent asks: "O Yudhiṣṭhira, *Veda* is truth and it maintains the *varṇa* system. If these (*guṇas*) can be seen even amongst a *śūdra*, then will he also be considered a brahmin?" Yudhiṣṭhira replies: "If a *śūdra* shows these qualities and a brahmin does not show them, then that *śūdra* is not a *śūdra*, neither that brahmin, a brahmin. But O Serpent, know him only to be a brahmin who reveals these characteristics and him to be a *śūdra* who does not reveal them." The serpent then asks: "O King with a long life, if a brahmin is to be known by his behaviour, then the whole system of *varṇa* would be useless." To which Yudhiṣṭhira replies: "O Snake with great intelligence, men of all *varṇas* can produce children with women of all *varṇas* and hence all *varṇas* are but a mixture. Thus it is difficult to test the *varṇa* of an individual. Moreover a man can beget children on any woman. Speech, sexual desire, birth and death are common characteristics of all human beings. So it is difficult to decide with regard to *varṇa* on these bases. A person with deep insight should consider character as the best thing to decide in respect of a *varṇa*. So, O best of the serpents one who possesses the best of the behaviour and has gone through all the *saṃskāras* is a brahmin."⁴²

The whole theory as propounded by Yudhiṣṭhira is not an original theory which traces the evolution of the *varṇa* that existed but a simple justification of a system which shifts the emphasis from

belonging to it, black like *tamoḡṇa*." G. H. Mess, *Dharma and Society*, pp. 51-59. Cox also seems to be of the same belief when he remarks: "The metaphorical use of the colour in the Mahābhārata seems to be closely identified with some sort of incipient *dharma*—a way of life—a virtue complex." The passage as noted above, in the light of Nīlakaṇṭha's commentary is simply off the mark. Instead of interpreting the qualities in the terms of creatures on the earth, Nīlakaṇṭha explains it in the terms of other worldly creatures. Evidently, the author of the Mahābhārata was not consistent in presenting *guṇas* as the index of the *varṇa* classification.

⁴² Mbh., III, 177, 25-32.

heredity to the character (*śīla*) of a person as revealed in his day to day behaviour. This basis of *varṇa* system thus granted a right to the individual to raise himself higher in the social hierarchy on the strength of his character.

This new change in the existing system as introduced by Yudhiṣṭhira is refreshingly unconventional and would serve as an impetus to the moral and spiritual development of an individual who would aspire for a high social position. And if this could be considered a true analysis, the system of *varṇa* can be regarded as a promoter of social and individual morality.

The Rāmāyaṇa also refers to this initial equality of human beings when Brahmā is reported to be saying to Indra : "O, Immortal Indra ! I have created this whole world of the identical form according to my intelligence. There is nobody superior in sight as well as qualities."⁴³

Parāśara, another sage, puts forward *tapas* as the basis of *varṇa* distinction. King Janaka asks: "I want to know how difference in *varṇa* arises. A son is said to belong to the *varṇa* of one who gives him birth. So, how did all those who were born out of one Brahmā acquire different *varṇas*?" Parāśara replies: "What you say is correct, O King ! but the *varṇa* distinction has taken place in this world due to the want of *tapas*. If both the seed and the field are the best, the product also is best but if either is bad so is the product."⁴⁴

Here also it can be noticed that a doubt with respect to the *varṇa* system is raised on the basis of equality of human beings. Parāśara tries to explain its rationale on the basis of *tapas*—which ultimately meant a strictly regulated ascetic life that involved a high ethical standard. Yet it is to be noted that he cannot completely free himself from the traditional belief of heredity and hence brings in a discussion about the quality of field and seed. If this is to be taken into consideration, a question would naturally arise as to from where the inferiority of either the field or seed would arise if everybody was equal at the time of birth. This problem might be solved by having resort to a consideration of *tapas*—lack of which on either side may bring degeneration. He also narrates a long list of sages achieving higher status in society by their austerities. Thus

⁴³ Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, 30, 19-20.

⁴⁴ Mbh., XII, 285, 2 ff.

he says: "O, King! those great souled ones who have made themselves pure by austerities even though born of low parentage cannot be considered low only because of their low birth. O, King! in ancient time the sages had produced sons in lowest wombs and yet they had transformed themselves into sages due to the power of their austerities. As for example my grandfather, Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, Kāśyapa, Veda, Tāṇḍya, Kṛpa, Kākṣivān, Kāmāṭha, Yavakṛt, Droṇa—the best of the speakers, Ayuṣa, Mātāṅga, Datta, Drumada and Matsya, all these *mahātmās* have gained their original *varṇa* by the power of their austerities and have been famous all over the world as the knowers of the *vedas*."⁴⁵ The fact that the mysterious birth of some of these sages is evidenced by the Mahābhārata itself indicates that the list is not absolutely imaginary.

A similar passage ⁴⁶ is given in the Ādiparva where Duryodhana makes a spirited attack on Bhīma and others when they prevent Karṇa from fighting with Arjuna on the plea of his low birth. "O Vṛkodara", he says, "It does not befit you to talk this way. Strength is the main criterion for a *ksatriya*. So one can fight even with the lowest of the *ksatriyas*. Again, the origin of the brave and of the rivers are difficult to locate. The one who pervades all this universe is born out of water; and the thunder-bolt is created out of the bones of Dadhici. Again, god Kārtika is heard as the son of Agni, Gaṅgā, Kṛttikā, Rudra and many others. Viśvāmitra—born out of a *ksatriya*—had attained the indestructible brahminhood. However, Droṇa—the best amongst the armed warriors—was born out of a water-pot. While Kṛpa of the Gautama family was born on a mass of *śara* grass. I also know how you were born. How could this one, refulgent like the son, born along with an armour and ear-rings, be born of the wife of a *sūta*? Can a she-deer ever give birth to a lion?"

These two passages—one attributed to Parāśara and the other to Duryodhana—cast doubt on birth as a proper criterion for status under the *varṇa* system. They put forward certain qualities as the basic test. Just as austerities could turn a person into a brahmin, strength could make him a *ksatriya*—thereby agreeing with Yudhiṣṭhira's approach to *varṇa* division mentioned above. The looseness of sex morals as reflected in

⁴⁵ Mbh., XII, 285, 12-16.

⁴⁶ Mbh., I, 127, 10-15.

some parts of the Epics, is supported by Duryodhana here, and that is why quality as determinant of *varṇa* is upheld. And yet so deep-rooted is the factor of lineage that Parāśara considers the question of *bija* and *ksetra* and Duryodhana remarks that a she-deer cannot give birth to a lion.

An examination of the actual instances of some of the brahmins as given in the Epics and the character they possess indicate that the notion of the Epics accepting the qualitative basis of *varṇa* does not appear to be fully justified. A passage in *Sāntiparva* gives the following qualities for a brahmin—they are also the very qualities which are enumerated in the Epics in a number of passages elsewhere. It says: "That individual is called a brahmin who is purified with different *samskāras* like *jātakarma*, who is pure, studied in the vedic lores and an adept in six types of *karma* (viz. *sandhyā*, *snāna*, *japa*, *homa*, *pūjā*, hospitality and the offering of five daily sacrifices—according to Nilakaṇṭha), who is particular about the observance of purity, takes food only after offering it to the brahmins, offers worship to the preceptors, observes the various vows regularly, and is attached to truth. Again that person who has these seven qualities, viz. truth, charity (*dāna*), nonviolence (*ahimsā*), softness (*akrūrātā*), modesty, compassion and austerity (*tapas*) is also a brahmin.⁴⁷

Here along with the religious regularity and purity of a brahmin, emphasis upon his ethical qualities is clearly visible. A survey of the Epic narratives definitely points out that while some of the brahmins well represented their *varṇa* by a high standard of ethical behaviour, there were others who could not keep up to the standard. Again, if a brahmin was always to speak truth, it was not his monopoly; King Yudhiṣṭhira—a *ksatriya* by birth topped the list of the speakers of truth. So ideal was his behaviour that he was considered *dharma* incarnate. His compassion in leaving an enemy unharmed even at the cost of his own advantage is unrivalled and his characteristic behaviour is sometimes a cause of anger for his younger brother, and spirited wife. His modesty is not given up even at the critical moment of starting of the Mahābhārata war, when he does not forget the etiquette of paying respect to the elders even in the presence of the danger of having to go to the enemy's camp alone. His softness is clear when he laments before Kṛṣṇa

⁴⁷ Mbh., XII, 182, 2-4.

the cruel duty that was his, as a *ksatriya*, when he had to start the war. His mastery over anger is perfect when he does not speak a single word of reproach to a person who wounds him. Such a perfect specimen of ideal behaviour, specially portrayed by the compiler as such, is never called a brahmin, neither does he enjoy the social status of a brahmin. As opposed to him, the fiery Parāsurāma who could kill his own mother without a moment's reflection, whose desire for vendetta for the murder of his father was so strong as to fill five lakes with blood, whose anger was so uncontrollable that he could curse a dutiful and brilliant pupil like Karna for not revealing his true identity, whose ego was so sensitive that he could not bear a rival in Dāśarathi Rāma, who could not only wield the mighty bow of Śiva but could break it—is considered not only a great brahmin but an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Bhīmaśena, the second Pāṇḍava, who is so cruel and never follows the honourable code of warfare, drinks blood like a *rāksasa*, is always praised and upheld as a *ksatriya*, while the refined Karna who is so proficient in the art of warfare, and who tears off his golden armour and earrings to satisfy a fake brahmin, is always reviled and discouraged as a *sūta*. Brahmins like Kauśika and Jājali who are proud of their asceticism have to seek the advice of a *śūdra* like Dharmavyādha and a *vaiśya* like Tulādhara. Yet neither do the brahmins lose their social status nor do others gain in their status. The Anuśāsanaparva (Chapt. 10) narrates a legend describing how a *śūdra*, by following the ascetic practices worthy of a brahmin, achieved a higher social position as a king in the next birth. Here, though a person is allowed to develop higher moral qualities, *varṇa* mobility is not granted to him in the present birth, but only in the next.

These are the few well-known instances from the Epics. Many more, probably of lesser importance, may be found. The noteworthy factor is that in spite of the ethical development of persons coming from different *varṇas*, the status to which they should be entitled, is not conferred upon them.

The story of Mātanga described in the Anuśāsanaparva⁴⁸ shows how impossible it was for a non-brahmin to achieve brahminhood in spite of a highly developed moral character. Mātanga was supposed to be the son of a brahmin. In fact he was an illegitimate son—a fact which he did not know. Various sacraments like

⁴⁸ Mbh., XIII, 27 (Bom. Ed.)

jātakarma etc. were performed upon him and he followed the occupation of a sacrificial priest. Once, being asked by his father to fetch some bricks for *agnicayana*, he went in a chariot drawn by a she-ass and her young one. Now as the cub could not run fast, Mātāṅga beat it so mercilessly that it started bleeding. The she-ass enraged at this cruelty, taunted Mātāṅga indirectly by addressing her young one thus : “O, my son ! do not be sorry for your sad plight. What else can you expect when a *cāṇḍāla* is driving the cart ? A brahmin would never be so cruel. He is always a friend of everybody. A preacher and preceptor—would he ever injure anybody like this ? This fellow is absolutely of a sinful temperament—otherwise, would he ever beat you—so young—like this ?” Mātāṅga, being much ashamed of what he heard, got down from the chariot and asked the she-ass to tell him why he was addressed as a *cāṇḍāla*. The ass said: “Your mother, though herself a brahmin, cohabited with a man of a *śūdra varṇa*, viz., a barber, in the folly of her youth and you were born of that union. Hence you are a *cāṇḍāla*.”

Mātāṅga at once returned to his father, who was surprised to see him return empty handed and inquired about it. Mātāṅga replied, “How can a person who is a *cāṇḍāla* perform sacrificial duties ? How can a person whose mother is an adulteress be well ? This ass declares that I am a *cāṇḍāla* born out of a brahmin woman and *śūdra* father and so I will go and perform penance to achieve brahminhood.”

Mātāṅga then went to the forest and performed severe austerities and ultimately Indra was pleased with him. Mātāṅga requested Indra to grant him brahminhood. Indra said, “O, Mātāṅga ! it is very difficult to attain brahminhood. You will destroy yourself because of this unreasonable desire of yours. Simple austerities can never achieve for you—a *cāṇḍāla*—that which is unobtainable even to gods, *asuras* and men.” But Mātāṅga was not to be convinced by that. He took to severer penances and again Indra returned to him and gave him a discourse upon the various births (*yonis*) in which one has to be born before becoming a brahmin. Not cowed down by this, Mātāṅga performed such severe austerities that he fainted. Indra supported him and again tried to explain to him the impossibility of the task he was bent upon achieving. Mātāṅga lamented his fate which made him suffer like this due to a

fault of his mother. "O, Indra", he said, "I am really sorry for myself as well as yourself. I can obtain your grace by austerities but cannot obtain brahminhood. O Śakra.... I am a person who has concentrated on becoming a brahmin, who has attained release from happiness and misery, who has no family. I am always non-violent and controlled in respect of the senses. Even then, how is it that I am not fit to attain brahminhood ? What bad luck for me, O Purandara, that even though I am a knower of *dharma*, I have attained this position only due to the fault of my mother ! I am sure that a man may strive and strive but fate is all powerful." And then, physically weak and helpless, he selected another boon, viz., that of moving at will in the sky by the power of his austerities.

A similar instance is that of a people called *Kapa* who were killed by the magical power of brahmins at the request of gods with whom they were not on good terms. They pleaded with the brahmins that they were of the same social status as the brahmins, because they possessed the same qualities as are desired in brahmins. They said, "All *kapas* are knowers of the *vedas*, intelligent, performers of sacrifices, upholders of the vow of truth; followers of ascetic practices, prosperous, celibates, vegetarians, regular offerers of sacrifice, considerate towards the children, self controlled, not approaching a woman in her periods, attaining heaven, performers of good actions, non-gambling and always taking their meals after a pregnant woman and an old man had taken theirs."⁴⁹ The brahmins did not listen to them and destroyed them as enemies of gods. The legend has only this relevance for us, viz., that the *varṇa* of an individual is not recognised on his *guṇa* and *ācāra*.

Though the qualitative basis of *varṇa* stratification was theoretically accepted, mobility from one *varṇa* in which an individual was born, to a higher *varṇa*, on the basis of qualities was rarely allowed in practice. This is made clear not only in the examples quoted above but even in the famous episode of Viśvāmitra attaining brahminhood by the power of his austerities which is explained away in the latter portions of the Epic as due to a miracle.⁵⁰ Thus it is told that Satyavatī, wife of the sage Ṛcika and daughter of the

⁴⁹ Mbh., XIII, 157, 7 ff (Bom. Ed.)

⁵⁰ Mbh., XIII, 4 (Bom. Ed.)

king Gādhi requested her husband who possessed miraculous power by his austerities, to grant her mother the boon of a son. She was herself granted a similar boon by the sage previously. The sage satisfied the desire of his wife to have a brother as well as a son and told her, "O auspicious one, after the menstrual period, you and your mother should embrace the *umbara* and the *pippala* trees respectively and then eat these sacrificial puddings, purified with the chanting of magic formulas, separately placed for you two and then each of you will have a son." Satyavati's mother however thought that the sage must have reserved a better son for himself and so persuaded her daughter to exchange the sacrificial puddings and the trees to be embraced. When sage Ṛcika came to know of this exchange, he was much upset and told his wife that the pudding reserved for her was full of the brahmanic qualities, while that reserved for her mother was full of *ksatriya* qualities and as a result, Satyavati's son would manifest *ksatriya* qualities, while Satyavati's brother would manifest brahmanic qualities. Satyavati was shocked to hear this and requested that her own son should not behave like a *ksatriya*. Let her grandson manifest *ksatriya* qualities. Accordingly she gave birth to sage Jamadagni who was the father of famous Paraśurāma, the great brahmin warrior. On the other hand, Satyavati's mother—queen of the King Gādhi—gave birth to sage Viśvāmitra. Thus Viśvāmitra attained brahminhood due to the power of the miraculous pudding eaten by his mother.

A similar legend is narrated about King Vīṭahavya by name, who also attained brahminhood and whose son Gṛtsamada was a famous vedic seer.⁵¹ This king took refuge in the hermitage of Bhṛgu to save himself from an enemy. When his enemy was chasing, sage Bhṛgu to save his life, said that there was no *ksatriya* in his *āśrama*. All the residents were brahmins. Thus Vīṭahavya attained brahminhood by the power of Bhṛgu's miraculous speech.

These legends clearly point out that *varṇa* is based on birth, qualities do not count. The change of the vedic episode of Viśvāmitra is particularly striking as it manifests the changed viewpoint about the *varṇa* mobility. Lineage is emphasised and very often, along with the enumerations of the personal qualities of an individual, we find the qualification of belonging to a noble family, or of

⁵¹ Mbh., XIII, 30, 44 ff (Bom. Ed.)

being born of a high parentage as a personal embellishment.⁵²

It is assumed that birth in a higher *varṇa* is accompanied with possession of a high moral character. It is also emphasised that however hard a person may try to behave in a good or in a bad way, his inherent nature, because of his birth in a particular *varṇa*, would at a critical moment express itself in his behaviour. Bhīṣma declares, "A person born in a mixed caste can be recognised from his behaviour which is different from that of an Aryan. And a person, even though born in the residence of a non-aryan can be recognised as belonging to a purer lineage by his behaviour, which resembles that of a good person. Know a person to be of a lowly origin by his non-aryan behaviour, cruelty and irreligiousness. A person born of a mixed parentage definitely exhibits the character of his father, mother or both and can never hide his origin. A person can never hide his inherent character, much less than a leopard can hide the spots on his body. And in spite of persons following different occupations and exhibiting different behaviour, very often they reveal their true character accidentally."⁵³

In other words, qualities do not decide *varṇa*, but they are the expressions and inclinations of *varṇa* in which a man is born. It is not left to a man to develop and to grow. He is not the architect of his character. He is born with certain good or bad qualities. His function is to unfold them through his behaviour. And it is with the help of these inborn qualities that he succeeds in performing the duties assigned to his status satisfactorily. Thus ethical development, intellectual and moral qualities, preference for and satisfactory execution of certain occupations are all rooted in birth. Birth is the centre from which they radiate. There is no question of quality or aptitude independent of birth.

As a logical outcome of the theory of *karma*, the inherent qualities of an individual are reported to be the outcome of the deeds of the previous birth. Thus the Gītā declares: "A person (who is fallen from the the yogic practices) is reborn in a noble rich family or in the family of the ascetics. Really such a birth is very difficult to be obtained in this world, because, O Pārtha, a good action never goes unrewarded."⁵⁴ Birth in a noble or rich family is here considered

⁵² Cf. Mbh., XIII, 22, 11; 353, 2 (Bom. Ed.)

⁵³ Mbh., XIII, 48, 39-46 (Bom. Ed.)

⁵⁴ Gītā, VI, 40-42; also cf. Mbh., III, 212, 12 (Bom. Ed.)

as a reward of the good actions done in the previous birth. These good actions as the context points out are here the ascetic practices leading to a highly developed moral character. Contrary to it bad actions indicated by lack of ethical qualities may lead to a birth in lower *varṇas*.

If this is taken into consideration a man may be called the architect of his own fortune. But if examined minutely, when the same theory is stretched backward to explain the very beginning of the *varṇa* stratification, it fails. Secondly, in the episode of Dharmavyādha, we see that though he was the son of a brahmin in his previous birth, possessed a good character and was learned in the *vedas*, he fell down from his position in the next birth, because he accidentally hurt a brahmin. And in his birth as a *sūdra* named Dharmavyādha, though he had developed an ethical personality befitting a brahmin, he expected to attain brahminhood not by the power of these virtues but by serving his parents and performing his *svadharma*.⁵⁵ Thus the emphasis is on the performance of *svadharma* leading to a superior social status in the next birth and not on the development of ethical qualities in this birth. As opposed to this, slackness in the performance of *svadharma* leads to a birth in inferior *varṇa* or may lead even to a birth in an animal category—as in the case of the king who was born a fox because he neglected his kingly duties.⁵⁶ Thirdly if the character of an individual was the manifestation of his previous deeds, there was no chance for degradation. The ethical virtuosity which was an inherent result of previous deeds would always lead to a further progress as indicated by *Gītā*. A brahmin could not be bad because his temperament would fail him in his attempt to behave badly. But instead, as the stories of Dharmavyādha and the king who failed in his duties indicate, even a brahmin could manifest bad ethical behaviour opposed to his inherent nature and as a result, fall into a lower *varṇa* group.

The functional aspect of the *varṇa* was at first not properly emphasised and as a result, as we have already noted there was no fixed occupation followed by a particular *varṇa*. To strengthen the

⁵⁵ Mbh., III, 205, 21-29; 206, 4-5; 200, 38.

⁵⁶ Mbh., XII, 112, 3-4; also cf. the story of King Nrga who was born as a bird because of the curse of brahmins due to his slackness in administering justice-Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, 53; Mbh., XIII, 6, 38 (Bom. Ed.)

varṇa classification there was a need to emphasise it and Gītā did that by enunciating the *svadharma* theory declaring boldly: "However remarkably another's *dharma* may be and however bad one's own, it is better to die following one's *dharma* because another's *dharma* is dangerous."⁵⁷ Thus the functional aspect of *varṇa* as represented by the *svadharma* theory of Gītā was fused with the *karma* theory and *svadharma* became the proper '*karma*' of an individual leading to a higher ethical character in the next birth and ultimately to salvation. According to the theory as laid down in the Gītā, no work that falls to one's lot according to his *varṇa* duty is impure, bad or sinful. Dharmavyādha is a bright illustration of this principle. Defending his profession of butchering animals, he says, "O Brahmin, mine is a hereditary profession and is proper for the family from which I spring. So I shall act according to my *dharma*. Do not be cross with me. I try to perform my *dharma* assigned to me by providence, according to my past deeds".⁵⁸ Thus Dharmavyādha though he is conscious of the fact that his profession is repugnant enough to cause anger in a person, does not change it. Even a robber who followed his profession dutifully would attain heaven, as the illustration of Kāyavya shows.⁵⁹ No choice is thus left for a person to change for better. Another important factor to be noted is that though theoretically, virtual equality of these divisions is granted and the proper following of all *varṇadharmas* lead to salvation, all persons who practice their own respective *varṇadharma* are not looked upon with the same tolerance. Philosophically it may have been propounded that "To a learned person, a brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog or a *śvapāka* (*cāṇḍāla*) are equal."⁶⁰ However, a probe into the social, political and religious inequalities imposed on the different *varṇas* reveal that it was not so in practice.

With an exaggerated emphasis upon superiority of brahminhood, the virtual equality of all *svadharma*s leading to salvation is superseded by the doctrine of gradual salvation through births in consecutive higher *varṇas* as a result of the proper performance of one's *svadharma*.

⁵⁷ Gītā, III, 35; cf. XVIII, 47-48.

⁵⁸ Mbh., III, 207, 21.

⁵⁹ Mbh., XII, 133, 23-26.

⁶⁰ Gītā, V, 18.

A parable in the *Anuśāsana parva*⁶¹ illustrates this principle of gradual rise in the social hierarchy and ultimately to salvation. A very small insect was passing on the road in the track marked by the wheels of a bullock cart. As soon as it heard a cart coming, it tried to hurry away out of it. The great sage Vyāsa who was passing by the road saw it hurrying out and asked it the reason for doing so. The insect replied, "I hear the noise of the cart coming near me and it is due to the fear of being crushed by the wheels of the cart that I am hurrying." Vyāsa said, "You are a member of the insect category of creation ; and so you cannot enjoy the joys brought in by the senses. Is it not better for you to die ?" The insect replied, "Everybody loves life. May he be an insect or a brahmin. I was a *śūdra* in my former birth. But since I did not respect the brahmins and guests and possessed many bad qualities like anger, cruelty, cunningness, greed, jealousy etc., I was born as an insect. But because I honoured my old mother regularly and once served a brahmin guest well, I remember my previous birth." Vyāsa then informed it that he himself was the brahmin guest and had visited the insect *śūdra* wishing his further welfare. And on that day also keeping the same thing in mind he explained to the insect the theory of *karma* and advised it to embrace death to acquire a higher birth. The insect followed the advice of the sage and was born in turn as a porcupine, a pig, a deer, a bird, and then a human being in the respective *varṇas* of a *cāṇḍāla*, *vaiśya*, ordinary *ksatriya* and as a king. As a king, it left the kingdom and started performing a severe penance but again with its welfare in view, Vyāsa visited it and advised it, "O insect, protection is the divine duty of the kings and you will obtain brahminhood, only if you perform that duty well. So protect well your subjects and control your senses. And then you will achieve brahminhood." The insect, who was then a king, returned to his kingdom, performed his duties well and so was reborn as a brahmin. And then as a brahmin after performing many sacrifices and acquiring the knowledge of '*brahman*' it achieved *moksa*. This story well illustrates the importance of performing one's *svadharma* properly, which would lead not to salvation, but to a birth in a higher *varṇa*. This meant that only a brahmin, who could perform many sacrifices and acquire the higher knowledge would attain salvation. Indra

⁶¹ Mbh., XIII 117 ff (Bom. Ed.)

also wants to convey the same idea to Mātanga in the same parva⁶² where he describes the gradations of rebirths in the same fashion. Thus *tapas* which is mentioned as the basis of *varṇa* distinction and a means of achieving higher *varṇa* mobility is disqualified here in favour of *svadharma* and the insect in the form of the king is persuaded not to practise *tapas*. Similarly Mātanga is also persuaded by Indra not to try to achieve the unobtainable by the power of austerities. It should be noted that to emphasise the concept of *svadharma* ethical qualities of compassion (*ānṛśans*) and of forgiveness are given a secondary place relative to hard-heartedness, while considering the *ksatriyadharma*. The Epic declares "For a *ksatriya* who wants to perform *dharma*, the qualities of forbearance compassion, mercy or pity do not exist."⁶³

Two theories are fused into one in the parable of the insect narrated above. To emphasise the importance of *svadharma* it is mixed up with 'karma'. *Svadharma* or the performance of one's *varṇa* duties is declared the right type of action for an individual, leading to salvation through a graded hierarchy of births in a higher *varṇa*. This evolution of the concept of *svadharma* thus denies the right of a person to perform the functions of a higher *varṇa* which is allowed in the Epic elsewhere.

Temporal aid is also invoked for the enforcement of 'svadharma' upon society. The foremost duty of the king is to maintain the *varṇas* and their proper relative positions. The greatest misfortune that falls upon people in an anarchical state is the mixture of *varṇas* and chaos of *āśramadharmas*. It was to prevent this chaos that the king wielded his power of punishment on people. Dharmavyādha thus describes how king Janaka ruled his people. "A king protects his subjects, enjoined in their own functions according to *dharma*. And in doing so he forces those people, who neglect their own *dharma* and behave in unbecoming manner, to return to their own *dharma*. One must always be afraid of a king because he is the lord of the subjects and just as he stops wild animals with his sharp arrows, he stops people from going astray from their *dharma*. O Brahmarṣi! there is none in Janaka's kingdom who does not follow his respective *dharma*. King Janaka would punish his own son if he did not behave according to *dharma*. But a person

⁶² Mbh., XIII, 28, 5-16 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶³ Mbh., XII, 10, 3; cf. also Mbh., XII, 14, 15; Mbh., XII, 22, 4-7.

who follows his *dharma* is not harassed by him. He keeps an eye on everybody by a system of secret spies.”⁶⁴ Further describing the evils that are brought on people, if the king does not behave according to his own *dharma* and does not fulfil his obligation to protect the subjects by duly punishing them, he says, “If the king would not start behaving independently, then *dharma* would fall into the background and *adharma* would prevail, and a mixture of *varṇas* would arise. Due to this the progeny would become ugly, short in height, mentally deformed, impotent, blind, deaf and big-eyed. Thus due to *adharma* on the part of the king the subjects are destroyed.”⁶⁵ The Mahābhārata also records that whenever there is no strong political authority, the *vaiśyas* and the *sūdras* rebel against the existing social order⁶⁶ and records the example of a wealthy *vaiśya* assaulting a brahmin.⁶⁷ Arjuna expresses his fears in the same tone. Afraid of the great destruction in the form of the Mahābhārata war looming on the country, and the state of anarchy that would follow the destruction he says, “With the destruction of the family, the family tradition becomes extinct and *adharma* prevails. And O Kṛṣṇa! when *adharma* prevails in the family, the women of the family go astray and produce a mixed progeny (*varṇasankara*).”⁶⁸ An ideal king is he, who maintains the *varṇāśramadharma*, performs many sacrifices and gives fabulous gifts to brahmins.⁶⁹ The descriptions of ideal kingdoms and ideal cities reflect a perfect maintenance of *varṇa* order and a high ethical standard achieved by the residents therein.⁷⁰ We have already noted how besides a temporal aid, a divine aid is also sought for, when Kṛṣṇa declares that he continues to perform his duties only for the prevention of the mixture of *varṇas*.⁷¹

In spite of the precautions taken to prevent the mixture of the *varṇas*, the numerous references to their origin and status show that *varṇa* mixture must have been a quite common phenomenon and attempts were made to explain it away.

⁶⁴ Mbh., III, 207, 27-31.

⁶⁵ Mbh., III, 207, 35-37 also cf. XII, 57, 15.

⁶⁶ Mbh., XII, 49, 61.

⁶⁷ Mbh., XIII, 76 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶⁸ Gitā, I, 40-41.

⁶⁹ Mbh., III, 3, 11.

⁷⁰ Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 6, 12, 16-19.

⁷¹ Gitā, III, 22-24; IV, 7.

Anuśāsanaparva of the Mahābhārata⁷² gives us detailed information about the various mixed castes and the unions of a son with a woman of another caste, leading to the evolution of a new mixed caste, thereby lending support to the belief that mixed castes arise out of intercaste marriages. Yudhiṣṭhira says to Bhīṣma, "I think the reason of a person being born in a mixed caste is either the desire for wealth, acute passion for sexual enjoyment or ignorance about another's caste." In the same chapter Bhīṣma replies at length about the origin of the various mixed castes. "The four *varṇas* were produced by the creator for the sake of *yajña*. But because a brahmin had a right to marry the wives belonging to the three other *varṇas* the son born of a *savarṇa* wife and that of the wife belonging to the *varṇa* next to his own belongs to his *varṇa*. While the son born of the *vaiśya* wife belongs to absolutely a different *varṇa*." Then he proceeds to give a long classification of the various intermixtures declaring, "O King ! a son begotten of a brahmin woman by a man of lower *varṇa* also deteriorates his family by his behaviour, because he is a *varṇasankara*." Then he proceeds to give a long list of the various *varṇasankara* tribes born out of the union of members of different castes with great precision. The confusion is worse confounded when the issues of those *varṇasankaras* are taken into consideration. It is seen that most of the *varṇasankara* castes enumerated in the list are occupational in character and the occupations followed by the members of these *varṇas* must not have been agreeable to the taste of the society. It is very probable that along with mixed marriages people following a different cultural pattern as well as those members of the Aryan society who did not fall into the brahmanic cultural pattern must have been included in the society under the name *varṇasankaras*.

A similar assimilation of the various ethnic groups in the Aryan society is obvious when foreign tribes are mentioned as *varṇasankaras*. The Śāntiparva of the Mahābhārata⁷³ ascribes the same social status to the south Indian tribes of *āndhras*, *pulīṇḍas* and *guhās* ; along with other tribes of *śabaras*, *cucupas* and *madrakas* and the north Indian tribes of *kāmbojas*, *gāndharas*, *kirātas* and *barbaras*. They are all described as sinners and are destined to go

⁷² Mbh., XIII, 48, 3-11 (Bom. Ed.)

⁷³ Mbh., XII, 200, 38-41.

to hell. A similar list elsewhere⁷⁴ mentions *śakas* (Cythians), *Chīnas* (Chinese) and the residents of Gāndhara as *varṇasankaras*. The Rāmāyaṇa⁷⁵ describes all the foreign and mixed tribes as springing out from Nandinī the wish-yielding cow of sage Vasiṣṭha ; it includes amongst the others, the *pahlavas*, *yavanas*, *śakas*, *kāmbojas*, *mlecchas*, *kirātas* etc. A similar mysterious origin is attributed for the *niśādas* by the Mahābhārata when they are described as born out of the right thigh of the king Vena.⁷⁶ Various ethnic groups with an alien cultural pattern, in some cases inferior cultural pattern⁷⁷, were assimilated in the range of the social structure of the Aryans. The various occupational cultural and social groups were assimilated in the aryan fold by integrating them in the framework of *varṇa* and their status confined by assigning to them parenthood in the terms of four *varṇas* by introducing them as a result of mixed marriages.⁷⁸ Thus it was the birth that was stressed for status and consequent rights and duties of the individual. In spite of this they are not considered within *varṇa*'s range. It is declared by the Epics, "The *varṇāśramadharmā* pertains only to the four *varṇas*. Those who have transgressed their *dharma*s and entered the *sankara* caste have no *dharma*.⁷⁹ They are allowed to behave as they like and to follow any damned occupation they choose. Their place of residence is the roads, country or forests and their ornaments are but made of iron.⁸⁰ Their personal characteristics also are described as cruelty and cunningness⁸¹ and their dirty food habits are often stressed upon.⁸² At the same time the Mahābhārata declares, "O innocent king, these mixed *varṇas* who maintain themselves by theft, should serve their parents, preceptor and other persons and the king ; should perform the vedic ceremonies considering them to be their

⁷⁴ Mbh., XII, 65, 13-14.

⁷⁵ Rāmāyaṇa, Balakāṇḍa, 54, 18, 20-23; 55, 2-3.

⁷⁶ Mbh., XII, 59, 102-103.

⁷⁷ The epic describes mixed *varṇas* as—thieves (cf. XII, 65, 17). It is to be noted that the Niśādas and Abhiras which were forest tribes must have maintained themselves by theft. The famous Kāyavya robber was Niśadā.

⁷⁸ Mbh., XIII, 48, 3-11; XII, 92, 30-32; 188; 200, 38-41; 65, 13-14;

⁷⁹ Mbh., XIII, 48, 29 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁰ Mbh., XIII, 48, 32-33 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸¹ Mbh., XII, 59, 103.

⁸² Mbh., XIII, 33, 35 (Bom. Ed.)

proper *dharma*. They should perform *śrāddhas*, dig wells, establish water places, build rest houses for travellers, give gifts to brahmins, be non-violent, speak the truth, follow hereditary occupations and should not encourage violence. They should maintain their family, give gifts for sacrifice with a desire to uplift their own self, and perform *pākayajnas*. These actions are prescribed for all people since old times.⁸³

Members of mixed castes, though condemned as beyond the pale of *Aryadharma*, were more or less on par with the *śūdras* in point of status and duties. They have been promised uplift through works of public interests and cultivation of moral life. Thus another large section of society was refused admission to the Aryan fold by keeping them on the borderland. By process of assimilation they were within the pale of Aryan society because, instead of being considered as foreigners, they are explained away as members born of mixed unions but still they are refused the social status granted to an Aryan twice-born, and are not considered worthy of any religious or social privilege.

Thus attempts are made to establish strongly the system of *varṇa* stratification in the society and to prevent people from encroaching upon the rights and duties that went with a social status higher than theirs, by emphasising the performance of *svadharma* as their only duty, and invoking temporal, theological and scriptural aid to enforce this duty incumbent upon them so as to prevent the chaotic conditions of the *varṇas*. The institution of *varṇa* placed ethics and morals in a secondary place allotting first place to an individual's birth and judged his merit mainly from that point of view.

We have tried to examine some of the theories that the Epic writers have put forward to justify an already existing system accepted as divinely ordained. The fact that the compiler of the Epic is himself so much confused in providing a rational basis for a contemporary system based primarily on birth is suggestive. What is emphasised in these pages is the fact that the writer jumps from one basis to another and then to still another and very often all of them in a single passage without any qualms with regard to contradictions or unreasonableness. Thus the system was neither an organic development nor was it spontaneous in its growth. It

⁸³ Mbh., XII, 65, 17 ff.

rather appears to be a system based on heredity and forced upon the society by the brahmins. Evidently it must have been challenged as it postulates gross inequalities. The rationalisation of *varṇa* stratification in terms of *guṇa* and *karma* is an attempt to make it acceptable to the people. That also explains the emphasis on the theory of *svadharma*. Even when the ethical or spiritual development of an individual is said to help him in acquiring a superior *varṇa* position, it is always in the next life. Hence the *varṇa* system cannot at all be considered as an impetus to the moral growth of an individual or society. Radhakrishnan also remarks, "The confusion of birth and qualities has led to the undermining of the spiritual foundation of caste."⁸⁴

We may now examine the relations between the various *varṇa* groups. The episodes and legends of the Epics reflect a phase of the evolution of *varṇa* stratification wherein the *varṇa* structure though imposed upon the society, theologically and temporally, was still not completely responded to and a struggle ensued for supremacy—especially between the two powerful *varṇa* groups, the *ksatriyas* as represented by the kings and nobles and the brahmins as represented by the various hermits and the priests.

The brahmanic records in the form of religious literature stress the supremacy of the brahmins. Buddhist and Jain records on the other hand stress the supremacy of the *ksatriyas* over the brahmins.⁸⁵ The fact that the rivalry between the *ksatriyas* and the brahmins is so vividly discussed in the vedic and the Epic literature may support the view that even in the post-vedic period the rivalry was not resolved nor a decision arrived at about the supremacy of the brahmins over the *ksatriyas*. In spite of the later priestly supremacy in the Mahābhārata, an older tradition indicating the supremacy of the *ksatriyas* over the brahmins often peeps out in the Epics. In a passage in the Śāntiparva,⁸⁶ *ksātradharmas* is exalted as the best of the *varṇadharmas*. *Ksātradharmas* is the first created by the creator and other *dharma*s are but its subsidiary parts. The *ksātradharmas* protects the other *dharma*s and so is considered superior to them. The *ksātra* nobility is always proud of its

⁸⁴ S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol. I, p. 591.

⁸⁵ cf. R. Ficks, The Social Organisation in North East India, pp. 84-92.
R. Davies, Buddhist India, p. 60.

⁸⁶ Mbh., XII, 64, 20-25, 29. Also cf. 65, 1.

strength and valour and looks down upon the brahmins for their beggarly attitude. "O beggar woman! When my father is sleeping or sitting, your father like a bard humbly praises him and sits on a seat lower than his! You are the daughter of one, to whom gifts are given and who accepts them and praises the givers; while I am the daughter of one, who gives gifts and who is being praised for that. O, beggar woman! You may cry, beat your chest and be angry, but what would you, who are poor and without any means, do to me?"⁸⁷ Thus retorts Śarmiṣṭhā—the princess of the demons—to Devayāni, the daughter of a brahmin priest. But she has to pay for this obvious arrogance. In the Epic version she is made to serve Devayāni. This inversion of the places of the *ksatriya* princess and the brahmin girl in the Epic is instructive of the fact that this quarrel between Devayāni and Śarmiṣṭhā does not represent mere womanly vanity but reflects the sentiments of the two social classes of society. A similar sentiment is echoed by king Sahastrārjuna.⁸⁸ It is not clear whether the king Sahastrārjuna mentioned here is the same, as the one who offended Paraśurāma's father and was later on punished by Paraśurāma, with the extinction of the *ksatriyas* from the world; or some other king. That apart, even in this case brahmanic supremacy is asserted by saying that Sahastrārjuna himself acquired his power due to the favour of a brahmin called Dattātraya and also by a long eulogy of the mystical powers that the brahmin sages possessed.

Paraśurāma—a brahmin—is said to have massacred the *ksatriyas* but he himself is however twice defeated by the *ksatriyas* once by Bhiṣma⁸⁹ and again by Rāma Dāśarathi.⁹⁰ Later, on however, Rāma's victory over Paraśurāma is justified by the former's identification with Viṣṇu allaying thereby *ksatriya*'s physical superiority over a brahmin.⁹¹

This feeling of superiority of strength at times found expression in coercion; and kings like Sahastrārjuna and Viśvāmitra snatching away the cows of hospitable sages like Jamadagni⁹² and Vaśiṣṭha⁹³

⁸⁷ Mbh., I, 73, 9-11.

⁸⁸ Mbh., XII, 153, 15-22 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁹ Mbh., V, 186, 8.

⁹⁰ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 76, 6-8.

⁹¹ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 76, 17-19.

⁹² Mbh., III, 116, 21.

⁹³ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 54; Mbh., I, 165, 18-19.—At the root of the

are illustrations of this coercion. Yet in illustrating that Viśvāmitra is completely subdued by the spiritual greatness of his rival Vasiṣṭha and obliged to adopt the ways of a brahmin to achieve a spiritual supremacy, the ultimate triumph of brahminhood is vindicated.⁹⁴

This continuous feud between the two upper *varṇas* preserved in these legends is reinforced by individual instances in which insults are flung by the *ksatriyas* in the face of the brahmins. The well-known examples of king Nahuṣa⁹⁵ and of king Vena⁹⁶ show the haughty attitude of the powerful *ksatriya* kings towards the brahmins. King Nahuṣa not only refuses to respect the sacred *vedas* but makes the famous *brahmarsis* like Agastya to bear his palanquin on their shoulders. The brahmanic tradition invents a fall for Nahuṣa from the heavenly world and death for Vena. The formal law and the Epic both lay down that precedence should be given to a blind man, a woman, a burden bearer and a king on the road. And if a king and a brahmin, met, the way belonged to the brahmin⁹⁷ but the same Epic narrates the account of a king who lashed a brahmin with a whip when the latter did not yield way to him.⁹⁸ Similar whipping is received by a brahmin at the hands of king Vṛṣadarbha, when the former insists upon being paid a certain amount of *dakṣiṇā*. Hopkins sums up the situation by describing it as: "The vain ideas of men conscious of mental supremacy and anxious to bring the state into harmonious relations with their egotism. The Epic furnishes social facts as found in an age as yet comparatively independent and portrays conditions that survived even the unscrupulous handling of the text by those opposing independents."⁹⁹

This conflict, however, ended in the triumph of the spiritual

cycles of the Paraśurāma legends and the Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha legend much enveloped in the mass of mystery to have any historical importance, might perhaps lie the history of a continuous feud between a brahmin family and a royal household. cf. C. Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde*, Vol. I, and E. W. Hopkins, *J.A.O.S.*, 1897.

⁹⁴ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 52 ff; Mbh., I, 165; XIII, 4 (Bom. Ed.)

⁹⁵ Mbh., V, 17, 7-17; I, 70, 261. Also cf. the similar case of King Purūravā who was cursed by the brahmins for the same reason.—Mbh., I, 70, 18-20.

⁹⁶ Mbh., XII, 59, 99, 100.

⁹⁷ Mbh., III, 133, 1; XIII, 104, 25 (Bom. Ed.); also cf. Manu, II, 138, 139.

⁹⁸ Mbh., I, 166, 6.

⁹⁹ E. W. Hopkins, *J. A. O. S.*, 1897, p. 76.

power of the brahmins and in the didactic portions of the Epic this supremacy is expressed conspicuously. The fact that a brahmin is superior by birth is declared in the famous maxim comparing the relative social status of a brahmin and a *ksatriya* viz., "Even though a *ksatriya* is hundred years old and a brahmin is ten years old, the latter is considered the father of the former."¹⁰⁰

The pretensions of priestly supremacy were reinforced by the claims the brahmins made upon the *ksatriyas*. What the brahmin asked—may it be a *dakṣiṇā* consisting of a few coins of gold, or a damsel, a daughter of a king—had to be bestowed upon him. The *ksatriya* kings are narrated to have invited the brahmins to beget blue-blooded progeny on their wives.

Miraculous powers and the ability to curse were the two weapons that the brahmins utilised to threaten the *ksatriyas* to yield to them. Even a *śūdra* brahmin was better than a noble *ksatriya*. Thus Bhiṣma declares, "O peaceful one, I would be pleased to be born even as a *śūdra* brahmin, then what a stroke of luck would it be, if I am born in a good family as a brahmin attached to *tapas*, *vidyā* and *dharma*!"¹⁰¹ Elsewhere it is said, "Even though a brahmin is not learned, and is foolish, he is considered a great god." Such passages can be multiplied. The superiority of brahmins over the *ksatriyas* was so insisted upon that even Kautilya had to provide a clause that the official status of an individual need not be in conflict with his *varṇa* status, but providing for privileges for the brahmins which made their superiority more significant and real and expected the *ksatriya* nobility to grant and protect these privileges.

This conflict between the two *varṇas* seems to have been resolved by a compromise, in which the *ksatriya* nobility joined hands with the brahmin as their *purohita*.¹⁰² This compromise is referred to as early as the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa,¹⁰³ but it is in the Epic,¹⁰⁴ where passages after passages emphasize the necessity of having a *purohita*.

¹⁰⁰ Mbh., XIII, 8, 21 (Bom. Ed.)

¹⁰¹ Mbh., XIII, 8, 12 (Bom. Ed.) For eulogy of the brahmins, cf. XIII, 8, 22, 151-157, 52; 53; 54; 56; 159 etc.; 77, 13; I, 68, 56; (Bom. Ed.) XII, 207, 2-3; VI, 116, 32; Rāmāyaṇa III, 11. (Griffith's trans.); Sundarakāṇḍa, 60, 21-23.

¹⁰² E. W. Hopkins, J.A.O.S., 1897, p. 76.

¹⁰³ Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, XI, 2, 7, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Mbh., I, 159; III, 183, 22, 27; V, 15, 32; XII, 73, 74, 7-14; VII, 137, 12; XIII, 59, 24, 36, (Bom. Ed.)

A stage was reached when the two *varṇas* presented themselves as an elite against the common people, viz. the *vaiśyas*.

Vaiśyas are regarded mainly as tax-payers to the Government. In the *Gītā* (IX, 32) they are associated with the *śūdra* as persons who have to seek their salvation through *bhakti* of Kṛṣṇa. "Whosoever they be that seek rest in me, either of low worth such as women, *vaiśyas* or *śūdras*, they find bliss." Association of the *vaiśyas* not only with the *śūdras* but even with women, who were considered inferior indicates that they were considered inferior to the two higher *varṇas*. And to the same purpose is said, "Fasting three nights or two nights is enjoined only for the brahmins and *ksatriyas*. If *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* should observe such a fast through delusion of minds, they would get no reward for it."¹⁰⁵ The son of a brahmin on a brahmin or *ksatriya* woman was called *sapinda* or *savarṇa*, but the son of a *ksatriya* on a *vaiśya* woman was not fit to be called *savarṇa*.

Because of the superior social status enjoyed by brahmins they were naturally looked upon as an ideal for the other *varṇas*, not only that but as noted elsewhere they were considered the moral guardians of the society. So people looked to them for moral guidance and a proper exposition of *dharma*.

The Epic reflects a society wherein this part of the brahmanic function is fully and properly carried out by them. The *Anuśāsana parva* compares the brahmins with bullocks who carry the burden of social morality on their back.¹⁰⁶ That this was not a simple eulogy but a fact is seen from the illustrations of various brahmin preceptors who ran hermitages in different parts of the country. On account of this high intellectual and moral life the brahmin enjoyed certain privileges. He enjoyed the following judicial privileges. The king is asked to exonerate the brahmins in six matters, viz., he should not be beaten; he should not have fetters put on him; he should not be molested with fines of moneys. He should not be driven, he should not be censured and he should not be abandoned." As far as the Epic evidence goes the later brahmanic influence makes Bhīṣma to declare that, "a *ṛtviḥa* even though guilty should not be punished by the king. God will take his care." The actual narrative in no way supports this theory.

¹⁰⁵ Mbh., XIII, 106, 2, 12. (Bom. Ed.)

¹⁰⁶ Mbh., XIII, 30 (Cal. Ed.)

Another opinion which advocated equal justice to everybody irrespective of *varṇa* consideration is also recorded by Bhiṣma. "Some learned people think that the justice imparted after the fashion of Śaṅkha and Likhita (i.e. to inflict punishment even for the offence of eating a fruit from one's brother's garden without his permission) is proper. They put forward the statements of sages and rules of *śāstras* to support their opinion and hold that a sacrificial priest should also be punished if he commits any offence.¹⁰⁷ The earlier tradition of the Epic even refers to a capital punishment for minor offences like theft, as is illustrated by the story of sage Animāṇḍavya, which is of course a legend fabricated to explain away the profound wisdom of Vidura. The story of Śaṅkha and Likhita also illustrates this. Even when judicial exemption came to be claimed, the brahmins were punished for anti-social activities and were excluded from the list of invitees to a *śrāddha*.¹⁰⁸ According to the later brahmanic traditions the severest punishment for a brahmin was a sentence expelling him from the country. The crimes for which this punishment was given were adultery with the preceptor's wife, murder of a brahmin, murder of a child and treason against the king. A brahmin's person was always considered sacred and that was why he was exempt from capital punishment.

Murder of a brahmin along with a woman and cow is considered a sin and not an offence.¹⁰⁹ Indra is said to have incurred the great sin of *brahma-hatyā* by killing Triśirā—a brahmin's son—fraudulently and for this sin of his he had to undergo many hardships. The exception of killing an *ātātāyin* brahmin i.e. a brahmin who assaults first with a raised weapon propounded by Śukrācārya has a marked brahmanic influence when Bhiṣma opines against the view of Śukrācārya and says such a person should only be exiled and should not be touched. The Epic narrates the story of King Janamejaya who had killed a brahmin and freed himself from the sin by performing an *aśvamedha* sacrifice.¹¹⁰ The *prāyaścitta* for absolving the sin ranges from simple things like fasting or giving gifts of various types to learned brahmins to *aśvamedha*, and

¹⁰⁷ Mbh., XII, 132, 17-18.

¹⁰⁸ Mbh., XII, 86, 22-23; XII, 59, 114. Manu, VIII, 350.

¹⁰⁹ cf. Mbh., I, 149, 4-12; XII, 74-16; Manu VIII, 380-81.

¹¹⁰ Mbh., XII, 146-147.

giving up one's life in a battle for the sake of a brahmin.¹¹¹ The *smṛtis* however consider the assault on the person of a brahmin worthy of the highest punishment as compared to the assault on the person of any other *varṇa*. Even a verbal defamation implies an equal injustice in the standard of punishment which is prescribed with the *varṇa* status of the person in view.¹¹² Though theoretically the brahmins try to emphasise the privileges to be granted to them, it is doubtful whether they were recognised by the judicial administration in the Epics, which is not as extravagant as the *smṛtis* for upholding the cause of the brahmins.

As for taxation the Epic says, that those brahmins who maintain themselves on the simple modes of occupation like study or teaching or sacrificial activities, are to be exempted from taxes or forced labour; not others who do not follow the functions worthy of a brahmin.¹¹³ Similarly in time of calamity, the king is allowed to collect taxes from everybody except those who are always attached to sacrificial activity. On the contrary, it is made the duty of the king to maintain a starving *śrotriya* (Mbh., XII, 78, 3-5).

Just as brahmins were given preference for judicial matters, they were granted a major portion in the division of property. The son of a brahmin woman by a brahmin father would get the main share of his father's property in contrast to a son born out of a *ksatriya* woman who would get only one-third. The sons born of a *vaiśya* and *śūdra* wife would get only a nominal part and the latter would receive it only as a benevolence rather than as a right,¹¹⁴ while sons born of a woman of the same *varṇa* share the paternal property equally.¹¹⁵ In matters of a treasure trove, the brahmin was favourably treated as against members of other classes. A learned brahmin was entitled to keep the whole of the treasure, if he happened to find it, except a sixth part which was to go to the state, if he honestly informed the king about finding of the treasure. If a king was to find a buried treasure, he was to distribute half of it among brahmins and was to keep for himself the other half. Similarly, the property of an heirless brahmin was to be divided amongst

¹¹¹ Mbh., XII, 36, 39.

¹¹² cf. Manu, VIII, 267-272 and 279-280; Yājñā., II, 215; Viṣṇu, V, 19.

¹¹³ Mbh., XII, 78, 2.

¹¹⁴ Mbh., XIII, 47, 11-20 (Bom. Ed.)

¹¹⁵ Mbh., XIII, 47, 16 (Bom. Ed.)

the brahmins, unlike the property of an heirless person of the other three *varṇas*, which went to the king.

Thus the brahmins, through their compromise with the *ksatriyas*, sought to secure for themselves privileges, which made their superiority more significant and real.

The lowest of the *varṇas*, viz., the *śūdras* suffered from disabilities which left them no better than slaves. Service of the three higher castes is the only *dharma* prescribed for them. The reason attributed for this eternal servitude is that, "It is the divine will of Prajāpati that a *śūdra* should serve the three higher *varṇas* and so he should do it without jealousy."¹¹⁶ As brahmin was the lord of all wealth he could lay his hand upon, "a *śūdra* had nothing of his own. All his wealth belonged to his master."¹¹⁷ A *śūdra* could not amass any personal wealth. He was to subsist on the remnants of his master, eat what was left over, and wear what was given to him.¹¹⁸ Theoretically his position was made almost as good as that of a slave. It must however be noticed, that in spite of this we do hear of *śūdras*, who accumulated good wealth and enjoyed a respectable position in the society.

If brahmins are considered, as a rule, pillars of morality, the *śūdras* are taken for granted as vice incarnate. A person who showed any sign of bad character is always compared with a *śūdra*, thus making him the general standard of comparison for moral turpitude. Bhṛgu declares "These brahmins who attached themselves to violence, falsehood and greediness; maintained themselves by following all sorts of occupations and fall from pure habits, are considered *śūdras* of the black hue."¹¹⁹ The Epic further declares, "O son never touch these eight things which are unfit to be sacrificed (*amedhyas*). These are a singer, a cock, a pillar of sacrifice, a woman in her periods and the husband of a *śūdra* woman."¹²⁰ So much was the repugnance towards the *śūdras* felt, that any one having any relation with a *śūdra* woman is castigated as an untouchable. It has already been noted how the friend of brahmin Gautama refuses the food offered by him because he had

¹¹⁶ Mbh., XII, 60, 27-29; XIII, 141, 51, 60 (Bom. Ed.) 282, 12-15.

¹¹⁷ Mbh., XII, 60, 35.

¹¹⁸ Mbh., XII, 60, 31.

¹¹⁹ Mbh., XII, 181, 13.

¹²⁰ Mbh., XIV, 21, 17-19 (Bom. Ed.)

adopted the profession of a *nisāda* and married a woman of that tribe.

This detestation shown towards the *śūdra varṇa* naturally led to a curtailment in the religious rights of the *śūdras*. In the *saṃhitās* as well as the *upaniśads*, a beginning was already made in this direction. It is carried further when a complete prohibition of religious sacraments is laid down for them. "*Śūdras* and women have no right to perform *agnihotra*"¹²¹—nay the money paid by them was considered unworthy for the purpose of the sacrifice.¹²² For the *śūdras* performance of *saṃskāras* is ruled out, and to emphasise this particular disability, he was called *ekajāti*, contrasting him thereby with the other *varṇas* who were called *dvi-jātiḥ*.

As a result of non-performance of the various *saṃskāras*, *śūdras* came to be refused admission for the vedic and other studies, the art of warfare, and the use of weapons under a brahmin preceptor. Thus Eklavya is refused tuition on the ground that he was a *nisāda*. He obtained proficiency in archery by sheer dint of hard work without any tuition from Droṇa whom he mentally accepted as his *guru*. This is borne out by the fact that when Droṇa asked for a *gurudakṣiṇā*—the fees to be paid to the teacher—he ungrudgingly paid it, though by so doing he lost his hold on archery.¹²³ Karna, a *sūta*, had to pretend that he was a brahmin in order to learn the use of weapons from the great Paraśurāma. But when his disguise as a brahmin is revealed, he was cursed by his *guru* in spite of his unflinching devotion towards the latter.

There is a story which describes how a *śūdra* is rewarded as a *ksatriya* king in the next life as a result of his performing the *pitr-kārya* with the help of a brahmin ascetic and by leading an ascetic life even though his *varṇadharmā* was to serve the three higher castes. The brahmin ascetic who helped him got degraded in the next birth and was born as the priest of this king who was the *śūdra* in his former life. Bhīṣma ends the story by admonishing: "O king, that brahmin, even though a sage, fell from his position because he taught a *śūdra*. So a brahmin should never preach a

¹²¹ Mbh., XII, 150, 20.

¹²² Mbh., XII, 169, 8.

¹²³ Mbh., I, 58, 8. (Droṇa asked for Eklavya's right hand thumb, so essential for shooting arrows; so that he may not surpass Arjuna, Droṇa's favourite disciple, in science of archery).

person of lower birth. O king, only the brahmin, the *ksatriya* and the *vaiśya* are the three twice born and by preaching them, a brahmin incurs no sin."¹²⁴

The *Śāntiparva*¹²⁵ allows the *śūdras* to perform the *pākyajnas* which were offerings of rice etc. in the fire, without chanting the vedic formulas. It refers to a wealthy *śūdra* called Paijavana, who had performed so many *pākyajnas* that hundred thousand pots full of corn were given to the brahmins as alms. Karna also declares that "I have many times performed sacrifices along with the *śūdras* and contracted relations with them."¹²⁶ May be, as Ghurye observes, "This was no privilege to *śūdras* but the entire willingness of the brahmin to open up certain channels through which fees might flow to them even though the donor may be a *śūdra*. Even the *dasyus* were encouraged to offer such *yajnas*."¹²⁷

An earlier tradition of the Epic reflects a stage, where no such segregation was enforced, against the *śūdras* and especially *cāṇḍālas* even though their social status is considerably low. Nor were any food restrictions observed. Kṛṣṇa refused the stately dinner of Duryodhana and accepted Vidura's invitation. This might be due to political reasons. But Rāma eats fruits offered by Śabarī, a *nisādi* and accepts the hospitality of his friend Gūha, a *nisāda*, without any scruples. The religious *śūdra* who offers service to guests is mentioned in the *Anuśāsanaparva*.¹²⁸

The Rāmāyaṇa reflects a stricter code of religious disabilities of the *śūdras*. The story of Śāmbhūka, narrated in the Uttarakāṇḍa of the Rāmāyaṇa condemns to severe death a *śūdra*, who dared to perform *tapas* to attain divinity. It is reported that this transgression of *varṇa dharma* on the part of a *śūdra* caused untimely death of a brahmin. When Rāma killed that *śūdra*, Indra, Agni and other gods declared from the sky, "Well done ! Well done ! Now this *śūdra* would not be worthy of heaven."¹²⁹ This story shows the later tendencies of the Epic which declares a *śūdra* unfit for heaven in spite of a high moral character and severe ascetic

¹²⁴ Mbh., XIII, 10 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

¹²⁵ Mbh., XII, 65, 21.

¹²⁶ Mbh., V, 139, 14 (Bom. Ed.)

¹²⁷ cf. G. S. Ghurye, Ibid., p. 56.

¹²⁸ Mbh., XIII, 10, 22-3, (Bom. Ed.)

¹²⁹ Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, 76, 1-8.

practices. To reinforce this attitude towards the *śūdras* it is declared, "In the three *yugas* (*satya*, *tretā* and *dvāpara*) a *śūdra* had no right to perform ascetic practice (*tapas*)."¹³⁰

When all the religious rights were denied to the *śūdras*, of course, there was no danger for them of going astray, nor could they fall lower than they were. How can then there be their salvation? Śāntiparva¹³¹ points the direction: "they can obtain religious *mērit* by following the path of good people, fulfilling the three debts they inherit, and performing small sacrifices without the *mantras*." A *śūdra* was inherently a bad person. Cruelty and cunningness along with impurity were considered his inherent qualities. Even a she-ass knew that one could expect nothing but cruelty from a *cāṇḍāla*. Any occupation was open for him—worthy or unworthy. No food or drink was taboo to him. His only uplift lay in the development of his character. And it must have required a great will-power to drag oneself up and stand erect against the licence of bad behaviour that a *śūdra's* life offered. Thus a good *śūdra* must have been a person of greater moral strength and a stronger will power than a good brahmin was. The Epic tries to glorify the cause of such high charactered low-borns when it says, "Some brahmins learned in the *vedas* identify the *śūdras* as the Lord Brahma himself, but I O king, see in them the highest of the gods, Lord Viṣṇu."¹³² Examples of such good *śūdras* are not lacking in the narrative as is obvious from instances of Dharma-*vyādhā* who expounds a philosophy of life to brahmin Kausika; Ekalavya who mirrors an ideal disciple, who unhesitatingly sacrifices his whole career for a shrewd demand of his so-called preceptor who refused to teach him; Karna who smilingly falls a prey to the conspiracy of Indra who comes in disguise as a brahmin to ask his golden armour and ear-rings that gave him immortality, not to break his vow of giving whatever is asked by a brahmin; and Mātanga who does not try to hide his mixed birth but strives to attain a higher position by his own efforts. Such bright illustrations of individuals are not wanting in the great bulk of the Epics. Not only that, but the Epics give evidence of wealthy and cultured colonies of the *śūdras*, and even whole kingdoms ruled by the *śūdra*

¹³⁰ Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, 75, 25.

¹³¹ Mbh., XII, 285, 30; XII, 65, 18-20.

¹³² Mbh., VI, 25, 41-42 (Bom. Ed.); cf. XII, 296, 8-9.

kings like Gūha. Karna, in spite of his supposed low birth in the *sūta* family, is consecrated as the king of the *Āṅga* country by Duryodhana most unhesitatingly. Sumitrā, one of the queens of Daśaratha, was a *śūdrā*. Chandragupta Maurya serves as an historical example of a *śūdra* king and it is very probable that the *śūdras* in practice might not have been in a downtrodden position in the society that the didactic portions of the Epics and the later tradition of the *smṛtis* lay down for them.

To recapitulate, the relations of the four *varṇas* as examined in the light of the Epic data, lead to the segmentation of the society into two classes, that of natural masters represented mainly by the brahmin and the *ksatriya* aristocracy and the natural slaves represented by the *vaiśyas* and the *śūdras*. The Epics prescribed privileges for a certain section of the society to the detriment of other classes. They all imposed disabilities on another section thereby denying it the equality of educational, civil, religious and political rights enjoyed by other members of the society. Not only that, but the Epic also encroached upon the freedom of an individual to a higher spiritual development with regard to certain sections of the society, viz. the *vaiśyas*, the *śūdras* and women. Another large section of the society (viz. the *cāṇḍālas*) was segregated as untouchables. Their place of residence and worship is outside the village. Their attire is different from that of the other members of the society and they are considered impure and sinners.¹³³

This shows the extent of the injustice which prevailed in the society. Though such injustice was not enforced rigidly in practice, the theoretical recognition of it is significant in the evolution of moral ideals of the society. The *varṇa* system monopolised cultural and ethical development for the two higher *varṇas* and segregated the two lower *varṇas* by moulding their *dharma*s in a fashion which would be beneficial for the upper classes to preserve their superiority. This privileged position was not accepted by the two lower *varṇas*, whose challenging spirit is sought to be restrained and pacified by enunciating the new ideal of *svadharma* and emphasising the old theory of *karma* modified to suit the new order that had evolved.

The main tenet of the *varṇa* theory is an emphasis on the birth as

¹³³ cf. Mbh., XII, 139, 27-30; XII, 10, 23, (Bom. Ed.); Rāmāyaṇa, Bala-kāṇḍa, 58, 10.

the sole basis of gaining higher social position irrespective of integrity of character. Moral quality was not given its proper place in life in the social system which was to rule the Hindu society for centuries. It had the further disadvantage as Tagore¹³⁴ puts it : "India laid all her emphasis upon the law of heredity ignoring the law of mutation and thus gradually reduced art into crafts and genius into skill."

¹³⁴ R. N. Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 117.

CHAPTER IX

THEORY OF KARMA

The theory of *karma*, i.e. acts and their retribution, is of great antiquity. Though the *karma* doctrine was not formulated fully in the R̥gveda, its ethical principles are already in evidence therein. Thus suffering is recognised as the fruit of previous sin and when a good man dies he goes to the next world carrying his merit with him."¹ *Iṣṭāpūrta* denotes the merit won by offerings and gifts to the priest. It is considered imperishable.²

The idea of good actions leading to heaven and of evil actions bringing punishment upon the evil-doer is given more concrete expression in the *brāhmaṇas* which refer repeatedly to the world of the pious (*sukṛtaṁ lokam*). Thus the word *sukṛta*—good action—is used synonymously for the word *iṣṭāpūrta*. Sacrifice—though a necessary means of obtaining favour with gods in the early stages—grew to unwieldy proportions in the *brāhmaṇas*, written specially to explain the elaborate details about sacrifice. Since it became the most important and all pervading aspect of religion, in the age of the *brāhmaṇas* the performance of sacrifice and matters connected with it seem to have been regarded as the *iṣṭāpūrta* of man. The exact connotation of the term *iṣṭāpūrta* is not given by the *vedas*, but "it evidently stood for the good a man had done here on this earth—his piety."³ "Whatever sacrifice was offered, whatever was handed over (*pradānam*), whatever was given and the *dakṣiṇā* offered, may *Agni*, present in all actions; place all that in heaven among the gods for us."⁴

Giving liberal gifts to priests, offering choice articles of one's liking (including animals like horses and cows) to the gods to propitiate and appease them and to follow the divine law *ṛta* which encompassed and controlled the world (and the guardian of which

¹ E. W. Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, p. 8.

² Kausitaki Brāhmaṇa, VII, 4 } as quoted by A. B. Keith in *Religion and*
Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa, II, 5, 3. } *Philosophy of Vedas* at page 478.

³ K. M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India*, p. 11.

⁴ Quoted by K. M. Kapadia in *Marriage and Family in India*, p. 11.

was Varuṇa) constituted *sukṛta*—good *karma* and probably a person who performed it was pious, while one who transgressed it was consequently a sinner. He was punished by Varuṇa with a disease, like dropsy and was sometimes thrown into dark waters in the netherworld. The Ṛgveda is full of fervent and heart felt expressions of the sense of sin and betrays intense desire on the part of the sages of old, to be forgiven for sin, particularly in their prayers to Varuṇa and Ādityas. Numerous significant words such as *āgas*, *enas*, *duskṛtam* etc. are employed by them in this connection.⁵

In the *brāhmaṇas* we meet with a reference to three debts—debts to gods, to the seers and to the manes, which could be respectively paid off by performing sacrifices, by studying the *vedas* and by having offsprings who would offer oblations. “Whoever pays the debts has discharged all his duties and by him all is obtained, all is won.”⁶ Could it be that the fulfilment of these debts was considered a *sukṛta*? It should be noted here that the actual performance of what was recognised as a pious action was all important—the intention behind a *karma* is not recognised. A sacrifice could be performed for overpowering an enemy or a rival wife also and once performed accurately, it was bound to yield the desired result.

In the *brāhmaṇas*, the world of the fathers was the appointed place for the holy dead even as it is in the Ṛgveda. This world of fathers is very often not distinguished from heaven to which a man goes according to the later literature. Thus the idea of heaven as distinct from the world of the fathers was not yet completely worked out. There are references to repeated deaths and renewed births in the *brāhmaṇas* but there can be no doubt that the repeated death is in the next world, not in this.⁷ Only at one place in the Śatapatha brāhmaṇa there is a “dubious allusion to rebirth.” “He who knows that the spring comes to life again out of winter, is born again in this world.”⁸ An interesting thing to note about this allusion to the doctrine of rebirth is that it is considered as a sort of reward. It is, however, in the *upaniṣads* that the doctrine of

⁵ P. V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstras, Vol. IV, p. 5.

⁶ Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, I, 7, 2, 1.

⁷ Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, XII, 9, 3, 12 (quoted by A. B. Keith, Ibid., p. 512).

⁸ Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, I, 5, 3, 14 } (quoted by J. S. MacKenzie, Hindu
and VI, 2, 2, 27 } Ethics, p. 34).

rebirth—"which is one of the essential tenets of the Hindu religion and has profoundly influenced Hindu thought and life and which has permeated Hindu philosophy, literature and arts"⁹—was distinctly evolved. The credit of first enunciating the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth as a natural consequence of each other goes to the great seer Yājñavalkya. In a discourse Ārtabhāga inquires: "If after the death of man, his spirit goes into the fire, his breath into the wind, his eyes into the sun, his mind into the moon, his ear into the ether, the hair of his body into the planets, the hair of his head into trees, his blood and semen into water—what then becomes of the man? Yājñavalkya replies, "Verily one becomes good through good deeds and evil through evil deeds."¹⁰ Yājñavalkya here clearly suggests that only good or bad actions of a person performed during his lifetime survive after his mortal frame has perished, the other parts of the body going to their respective places of origin. At another place he further elucidates this doctrine of *karma* by connecting it with the doctrine of rebirth. "As a caterpillar, after reaching the end of a blade of grass, finds another place of support and then draws himself over towards it; and as a goldsmith after taking a piece of gold chisels out another newer and more beautiful shape; so does this Self after having shaken off this body and dispelled ignorance, fashions for himself another newer and more beautiful form whether it be of the father or the *gandharvas* or the gods or Prajāpati or Brahman or any other living beings."¹¹ This Self then becomes as his act and behaviour has been. Here the doctrine of rebirth is clearly enunciated saying that the soul discards the old body and adopts a newer one more beautiful. Not only that but the doctrine of *karma* emphasises that a person is the architect of his better fortune.

The Chāndogya upaniṣad gives us the most detailed account of this theory of transmigration. The forest ascetic equipped with knowledge and faith enters after death the *devayāna*, which leads to salvation. The householder who performs sacrifices and fulfils his other obligations properly goes by *pitryāna* to the moon, where he abides till his actions are consumed, and then returns to the earth, where he is first born as a plant and then as a member of

⁹ P. S. Aiyer, *Evolution of Hindu Moral Ideas*, p. 134.

¹⁰ Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, III, 2, 13.

¹¹ Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, IV, 4, 2-5.

one of the twice-born *varṇas*. This is a kind of double retribution, first in the next world and then by transmigration in this. The wicked are born again as *cāṇḍālas*, dogs or swine. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad (VI, 2, 15, 16) gives a similar account. The Kauṣītaki upaniṣad (I, 2, 3) gives a somewhat different account according to which after death all go first to the moon. From there some go by the path of the fathers (*pitṛyāna*) to Brahman while others return to various forms of earthly existence ranging from a human being to a worm. Here there is no fruition of *karma* before one returns to this world.

Here was a fusion of the old vedic belief of a richer life in the company of gods and Yama after death, and the belief in transmigration. Accordingly the sages who after their death went by the path of the gods attain salvation and enjoy eternal bliss. Those who follow the *pitṛyāna* enjoy heaven, but have to return to the earth again and are reborn in the various kinds of life—*yonis*. This upaniṣadic distinction of the *devayāna* and *pitṛyāna* is accepted by the Gītā also with a slight but significant modification. The Lord says to Arjuna, “O best of the *Bharatas*, I will describe to you how *yogīs* who die at a particular time do not return, while others who die at a particular time return. Those knowers of *Brahman* who die during fire, light, day, the bright half of the moon and the summer solstice attain *Brahman*. A *yogī* who dies in smoke, night, the dark half of the moon and winter solstice goes to the region of the moon and returns. These are the eternal bright (*śukla*) and dark (*kṛṣṇa*) paths in the world. One who follows the first does not return while one who follows the other returns (to this world).”¹² The *devayāna* and the *pitṛyāna* here are symbolised with a particular period of time, viz. the summer solstice and the winter solstice along with other symbols of light and darkness, instead of the mental equipoise or perfection, though it pervades the whole teaching of Gītā in the personality of a *sthītaprajña*, *yogī* or *bhakta*. The fact is that in this verse the description of the two paths given in the *upaniṣads* is presented in a different way which affects the old concept adversely. The Gītā further lays a great emphasis on the ethical virtuosity of an individual, which is not found in the vedic literature. This is once again lost in the Epics. The Epic literally gives importance to the time factor—a fact

¹² Gītā, VIII, 23-26.

evident in the account of Bhīṣma's death. He postponed his death so as to die during the summer solstice that he may attain salvation through *devayāna*.¹³

The doctrine enunciated by Yajñavalkya regards desire as responsible for the continuation of the cycle of birth and death. "Man is altogether and throughout composed of desires (*kāma*), as are his desires so is his insight (*kr̥tu*), as is his direction so are his acts, as are his deeds so is his destiny."¹⁴ Hence if the self has left any desires in him while yet he lives in his body, he returns from his sojourn to his existence again; if no desires be left in him, he becomes one with *Brahman*."¹⁵ Thus the *upaniṣad* declares, "When all the desires that are in his heart are got rid of, the mortal becomes immortal and attains Brahman here."¹⁶

The Gītā introduces itself as a treatise on *karmayoga* or the path of action. The author of the Gītā insists that, "Though both, renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) and *karma* (*karmayoga*), lead to one's welfare; of the two *karma* is better. (V, 2.) Actions are unavoidable and, however one may try, one cannot refrain from performing the physical functions while still living. *Prakṛti* itself leads him to actions, so the Gītā teaches us as to how *karmas* should be done, so that they may not prove binding and come in the way of salvation. Salvation was to be achieved not by restraining oneself from the performance of all actions through the eradication of desires, but by sublimating the desires and performing actions in a disinterested manner as one's duty."¹⁷ The central theme of the Gītā, as Tilak¹⁸ opines can be summarised in one verse sung by the Lord, viz.: "In work be thine office, in their fruits must it never be. Be not moved by the fruits of works; but let not attachment to worklessness dwell in thee."¹⁹

If duty for the sake of duty was the motto of a *karmayogin* (follower of the path of action), dedication of all works as a service to Lord Vāsudeva was the motto of a *bhakta* (devotee). In the Gītā, action itself is not very important; the method of discharging

¹³ Mbh., VI, 115, 48-51, XII, 11, 13-14.

¹⁴ Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, IV, 4, 1, 2, 6, 7.

¹⁵ Quoted by K. M. Kapadia in Marriage and Family in India, p. 14.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gītā, III, 7-19.

¹⁸ B. G. Tilak, Gītā Rahasya, pp. 159 & 895.

¹⁹ Gītā, II, 47 (Trans. L. D. Barnett).

the function and the motive behind it is what is all important. Firstly, an action was to be performed with complete detachment, dedicating it to the will of the Lord, and secondly, the motive behind it was to maintain and preserve the welfare (*yogaksema*) of the world. The essence of the rule is devout work for the sake of the world's order without thought of self. *Gītā* makes a great advance by supplying an ethical motive for all sorts of actions.

All human actions, in their varied forms dedicated to the Lord, in a spirit of perfect selflessness are identified by the *Gītā* with the term sacrifice. In its highest phase, it is the sacrifice of knowledge (*jñānayaજ્ઞા*), the attainment of perfect enlightenment through complete surrender to the supreme reality.²⁰ Thus sacrifice conduces to the prosperity of man in its physical aspect, and the highest spiritual development of a person in its symbolic aspect. Yudhiṣṭhira reiterates the same doctrine in a less philosophical manner to his frustrated queen saying, "O princess, I perform actions (*karma*) not to get a reward out of them. The scriptures say, 'Give gifts,' 'Offer sacrifices,' and that is why I give gifts and offer sacrifices. O Kṛṣṇā, I may get a reward for my action; or I may not get it. But I follow the duties of a householder. O you of beautiful waist, I follow *dharma* not to obtain any merit out of it, but because I have to follow the *śāstras* and because all good people do so. O Kṛṣṇā, I follow *dharma* because it is my second nature."²¹ He also says that those who trade in *dharma* by expecting some reward out of it, never get the merit they ask for.²²

Vedic sacrifices, performed with a desire for heaven, are absolutely disapproved by the author of *Gītā*.²³ Performance of such sacrifices leads to the desired objects, viz. heaven and the material enjoyment attached with it. But the merit accrued by the performance of such sacrifices was finite and as soon as the stock of the merit was exhausted, the sacrificer had to come down to the earth again.²⁴ The *Mahābhārata* narrates two legends, one of Yayāti²⁵ and another of a king called Indradyumna²⁶ illustrating

²⁰ *Gītā*, IV, 33; IX, 13; *Mbh.*, XII, 286, 18; 197, 14.

²¹ *Mbh.*, III, 32, 2-4.

²² *Mbh.*, III, 32, 5.

²³ *Gītā*, II, 42-46.

²⁴ *Gītā*, IX, 20-21.

²⁵ *Mbh.*, VI, 41-43; I, 75.

²⁶ *Mbh.*, III, 191.

this principle. According to these legends, both these kings had to descend to the world from the heaven after their merit was exhausted. Unless a perfect mental equilibrium and a complete conquest of the senses are achieved, the high ideal of selfless actions is difficult to be followed. Gītā perhaps stands singular in emphasising the ethical development of an individual irrespective of his functions in the society. Whatever may be the social status of a person and whatever may be the means—*jñāna*, *yoga*, or *bhakti* (knowledge action or devotion)—through which he may try to achieve salvation, ethical development of a person is stressed upon. The descriptions of a *sthītaprajña*,²⁷ a *triguṇātīta*,²⁸ a *bhakta*²⁹ or a *yogī*,³⁰ which all tally more or less in content, emphasise some of the highest ethical qualities. The Śāntiparva also defines *karma* as one's *dharma* which, in its turn, is defined in terms of various ethical qualities.³¹ The perfect state was a difficult achievement and Gītā accepts the endless wheel of life and death as the effect of *pūrvakarma* to achieve it. Describing the fate of a person who has failed in his attempts of attaining a perfect equilibrium of mind (*yoga*) the Lord declares, "There is no destruction in this world as well as the other. A person who tries to do good, never attains any bad position. A person who has fallen from *yoga*, attains the world of the meritorious, and having stayed there for many years he is born in a rich noble family, or in the family of an intelligent *yogin*. Really such a birth is very difficult to be obtained in this world. There he attains the intellectual standard of his former birth and thus trying again and again, he attains salvation after many births."³²

Another way of attaining quick salvation was by the path of devotion. From the vedic times the notion of divine will or God's grace inspiring and absolving human actions persists in spite of the theory of *karma* and its retribution. We have already referred to the fervent prayers made to Varuṇa to absolve an individual from his sin. Gītā, like all the sectarian works, inculcates the view that

²⁷ Gītā, II, 55 ff.

²⁸ Gītā, XIV, 21 ff.

²⁹ Gītā, XII, 13-14.

³⁰ Gītā, V, 7, 26.

³¹ Mbh., XII, 279, 6-19.

³² Gītā, VI, 40-45.

the favour of God, combined with the antecedent loving faith of the worshipper, surpasses all effects of the actions committed in the previous birth. The Lord declares, "Leave all your *dharma* and come to me; I will absolve you of all your sins. Do not hesitate."³³

The Lord further declares, "O Arjuna, neither the (knowledge of) *vedas*, asceticism, liberalism, nor sacrifice can lead to a vision of mine which you had just now. I am available to those who propitiate me with sincere devotion. They can see me and reside in me." (XI, 53-54). Even a smallest effort on the part of a sincere devotee could lead him to salvation. "Fruits, flowers, leaves or water, any small thing offered to me devotedly are accepted by me." (IX, 26). Even people who are of low social status can achieve salvation with *bhakti*. "Those born as sinners (*pāpayoni*), women, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* attain the highest bliss by seeking refuge in me, then surely the brahmins and the *rājarsis* would of course obtain me. Hence, O Arjuna attach your mind to me, become my devotee and bow to me. Thus your soul attached to me and yourself completely lost in me, you will surely attain me."³⁴

The Gītā thus annuls the logic of *karma*, in spite of its strong advocacy of the doctrine otherwise; yet it should be noted that the high ethical standard of the Gītā requires even from a *bhakta*, a highly developed ethical character without which god's grace was impossible to obtain. The Lord describes the characteristics of a devotee dear to him in the following manner, "He is not jealous of other creatures, is friendly towards all creatures, is without attachment and pride, is with a perfect mental equilibrium in misery as well as happiness, forgiving, satisfied and with a concentration, has conquered his mind, possesses a fixed determination. Such a devotee is dear to me."³⁵ This sentiment was however exploited in the later development of the doctrine, and God's grace irrespective of ethical integrity was effective to abolish the effects of sinful *karmas*. Even a sinner could call out God's name at his last moment and would attain salvation as the story of Ajāmila indicates.³⁶

³³ Gītā, XVII, 66.

³⁴ Gītā, IX, 32; Gītā accepts the *varṇa* stratifications and the initial inequality of human beings thereby.

³⁵ Gītā, XII, 13-14.

³⁶ Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 1-2; cf. 2, 7-9.

Now the question is, is man free ? Or is he a helpless agent in the hands of his fate ? In a dialogue between Sañjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra three agencies are enumerated as the cause of a particular action. "There are three opinions as to who is the real performer of actions. Some declare that creatures are driven to act in a particular manner by the inspiration of god, some declare actions to be the direct result of one's free will, while some say that previous actions lead them to the performance of actions. Thus there is no fixed opinion as to who is the real agent of an action."³⁷ In the preceding verse, however, Sañjaya declares that "A person does not perform actions, good or bad. He is not independent. He is made to act like a wooden machine."³⁸ Accordingly, the agent of action is not the human being. He is either driven to action by God's will or instigated by his past actions. And yet in the same passage Sañjaya declares, "A person becomes unhappy due to his own misbehaviour; he should not blame God or time for it."³⁹ Here it is not specifically mentioned whether the misbehaviour of a person is one committed in this life or in the past birth. In a passage in the Śāntiparva, sage Vyāsa consoles king Yudhiṣṭhira, saying that the latter is in no way responsible for the slaughter of his relatives. A person is driven to action by four agencies; they are, God, the individual himself (*purusa*), inherent nature (*haṭha*) and destiny—fruits of the past actions.⁴⁰ The passage is placed here, to console Yudhiṣṭhira by impressing on him that he incurred no blemish out of the slaughter committed by him. He was not the agent. Was it pre-ordained ? So decreed by God ? Or was it the *karmafala* of the Kauravas and he was merely helping the fulfilment of their destiny ? Vyāsa has not cleared his position. Elsewhere, however, it is said more than once in the Mahābhārata, that a person is only an instrument in the hands of destiny: "A man instigated by somebody else behaves like a wooden puppet drawn by a thread. I really believe that *daiva* is more powerful than the action of a man."⁴¹ The kings killed in the Mahābhārata war were already killed, Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna were only

³⁷ Mbh., V, 156, 15.

³⁸ Mbh., V, 156, 14.

³⁹ Mbh., V, 156, 9.

⁴⁰ Mbh., XII, 32, 11.

⁴¹ Mbh., III, 31, 22.

instrumental in killing them.⁴² Gītā declares that the various kings taking part in the Mahābhārata war were already killed by *kāla*. Arjuna was only instrumental in killing them.⁴³ And so one has to follow his preordained fate determined by the actions of his previous births.⁴⁴ Kṛṣṇa accepts his limitations when he declares, "I shall put up my best efforts to establish peace, but I shall not be able to alter the preordained destiny."⁴⁵

In this wilderness of fatalism, there are also glimpses of encouragement advocating human effort. Parāśara thus declares, "O son, I do not see anything like fate, nor the reasons that produce fate. A person acquires success by his efforts, may he be a god, a *gandharva* or an ordinary human being." He also accepts that all creatures are influenced by the result of their past actions like vessels which look as if made of gold or silver because of gilt. In spite of it one must act for one's welfare.⁴⁶ Draupadī also goads her husband Yudhiṣṭhira to act. She accepts the overpowering influence of destiny but she says in spite of failure one must put up effort which may yield fruit sometimes.⁴⁷ Fate and actions are declared as equally powerful by a beautiful simile given by Bhīṣma, "*Daiva* and *puruṣārtha* are equally important like the two wheels of a chariot, yet I consider *puruṣārtha* to be better of the two because its result can be seen in this life while fate is decided in the next."⁴⁸ In all such discussions even though the power of fate over human efforts is accepted and it is declared that in spite of a well guarded course of action in this life, a person may have to face disaster because of some actions committed in his previous life, yet it presents us with a dynamic view of life according to which a person can fight against destiny and try for a better fate by putting forth efforts.

A further check on individual efforts is introduced by the exposition of the new doctrine of *svadharma*. The author of the Gītā declares⁴⁹ that the different functions of the *varṇas* are allotted to

⁴² Mbh., XII, 10; 15; 26; 32; 34; Gītā, II, 32-34.

⁴³ Gītā, II, 27; XI, 26-27; XVIII, 59-61.

⁴⁴ Mbh., XII, 10, 28.

⁴⁵ Mbh., V, 77, 5.

⁴⁶ Mbh., XII, 279, 10-12.

⁴⁷ Mbh., III, 32, 3-21.

⁴⁸ Mbh., XII, 56, 15 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁹ Gītā, XVIII, 41.

them in accordance with their inherent *prakṛti* which they inherit due to their past behaviour and a person who remains attached to his inherent functions attains salvation.⁵⁰ The threefold (*triguṇātma*) *prakṛti* pervades the whole creation.⁵¹ Taking these *guṇas* (viz. *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*) as the basis, the functions of the individuals are divided into the functions of four *varṇas*, so as to support the social order and the individuals with a particular inherent *prakṛti* following a function suitable to their *prakṛti* are called brahmins, *ksatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* respectively. By following the function which is natural to him, a person does not attain any blemish,⁵² so the function which is natural to a person following from his *prakṛti*, should not be discarded by an individual. Another's function may suit a person well, but that should not be adopted by him. "Better to follow one's own *dharma* full of blemishes than another's which is more suitable to be followed. It is better to die following one's *svadharma* because another's *dharma* is dangerous."⁵³

A man was born in a high or low *varṇa* according to his actions in the past birth and he had to perform the duties of his station in life carefully and help the fulfilment of destiny as his *dharma*. Theory of *karma* was thus provided with a philosophical basis for its ready acceptance.

This overall emphasis on destiny and *svadharma* ignored the ethical development of the individual which is the essence of *Gītā*. An expression is given to it at one place in the *Mahābhārata*. When Mātanga, an illegitimate brahmin boy, not able to gain brahminhood after severe penance, declares dejectedly, "How ungraceful the fate is towards me. I know *dharma* properly, yet I have attained such a bad state, due to the fault of my mother. Thereby it is sure that in spite of human efforts, one can never transgress destiny."⁵⁴ King Triśaṅku, who had become a *cāṇḍāla* due to a curse, also echoes a similar sentiment in the *Rāmāyaṇa* when he says, "O best of the sages, I have performed many *yajnas*, protected my subjects according to *dharma*, and satiated the sages by good behavi-

⁵⁰ *Gītā*, XVIII, 42-45.

⁵¹ *Gītā*, XVIII, 40; also cf. IV, 13.

⁵² *Gītā*, XVIII, 47.

⁵³ *Gītā*, III, 35; XVIII, 47-48.

⁵⁴ *Mbh.*, XIII, 29, 19 (Bom. Ed.)

committed knowingly. Just as a cloth, which is formerly white but is dipped in different colours, can be cleaned again by washing, but the cloth which is coloured fast by black colour cannot be whitened again, so a person can purify his conscience by expiations etc. But a sin committed knowingly cannot be cleared. A person who commits a sin intentionally gets the punishment of his sin, as well as the reward for the expiations performed to wipe it off, separately. An intentional sin can never be destroyed.”⁶⁴ Very soon, however, a different view is put forward by Parāśara who declares, “But I believe, O King, that an action whether performed intentionally or unintentionally is always retributed, only the retribution varies in degree according to the intentions of the person at that time.”⁶⁵

A similar incongruity is found in the theory of various rewards or punishments in the Epic. The Mahābhārata discusses a view, in which a man is benefited or punished not only by the *karma* he performs but by the *karmas* performed by somebody else. The Epic declares that, “A man always obtains the return of his *karmas*, he never enjoys the good fruits of the actions performed by somebody, nor the punishment of another’s sins.”⁶⁶ Elsewhere, however, it is declared, “A *karma* once performed never goes unretributed. It may not yield fruit immediately but like the earth, it gradually visits its performer, if not him, his son, his grandson or even his descendants.”⁶⁷ Similarly the king’s sins visit his subjects in the form of droughts, floods and plague,⁶⁸ A husband and a wife share the merit accrued by each other and a faithful wife may even earn a heaven for her husband.⁶⁹ According to the same theory the merit of good deeds earned by a person can be transferred to some other person’s name as the cases of Yayāti and his grandsons,⁷⁰ or the *Jāpaka* brahmin show.⁷¹

“Most of these modifications of *karma* are to be explained by the impact of divergent beliefs which were older than *karma*, and

⁶⁴ Mbh., XII, 280, 6, 10-11.

⁶⁵ Mbh., XII, 280, 14-16; also cf. Manu, XII, 62, 81.

⁶⁶ Mbh., XII, 279, 21.

⁶⁷ Mbh., XII, 92, 20.

⁶⁸ Mbh., XII, 91, 33-36.

⁶⁹ Rāmāyaṇa, II, 27, 4-5.

⁷⁰ Mbh., I, 92, 10-15.

⁷¹ Mbh., XII, 192, 48-49.

survived in one form or another, interposing themselves between the believer's mind and his newer belief."⁷² These diverse beliefs about the potency of *karma* and retribution seem to have been current and they have been all incorporated in the Epics. But in the process of their incorporation in the body of the Mahābhārata the foundations for the ethical development of the individual were gradually undermined.

⁷² E. W. Hopkins, J. R. A. S., 1906, p. 588.

CHAPTER X

ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT (1)

“As religion deals with the relation of man to the divine powers, morality concerns man’s relation with his neighbours.”¹ But the two spheres of religion and morality have been inescapably intermingled, in varying degrees, in Sanskrit literature. Thus the Sanskrit term “*dharma*” stands for the divine as well as the moral law. Literally, the word *dharma* means: “What holds together, signifying the basis of all order, whether social or moral.” It is sometimes used as a purely moral concept and stands for right or virtuous conduct which ultimately leads to some form of good. But in the ordinary sense it is a means to religious merit which, operating in some unseen way, will bring good reward to a person—either here or hereafter. Hence even though the conception of *dharma* is predominantly ritualistic, it does not cease to have the ethical significance with which we are presently concerned.

This concept of *dharma* has its roots in the R̥gvedic concept of *ṛta*. “*Rta* is the high order of the universe and of sacrifice. It also meant ethical conduct, the true way as opposed to its negative ‘*Anṛta*’. It is the order instituted by the wise spirit as the regulator of the world.” *Rta* also had a narrower connotation, meaning truth as opposed to falsehood. *Varuṇa* was the upholder of this high order represented by the term *ṛta*. The followers of *ṛta* were rewarded with a happy life after their death in the land of Yama, while those who transgressed this law of *Varuṇa* were punished by him either with a disease of dropsy or by being thrown into the netherworld. In brief, the ethical contents of the R̥gveda can be summed up as follows: “Morality is an expression of divine law, denoted by the term *ṛta*; sin is in opposition to that law and the sinner is one who is out of harmony with the higher spiritual environment which encompasses and controls the world.”²

The system of ethics embodied in the conception of *ṛta*, pervading

¹ A. A. Macdonell, Lectures on Comparative Religions, p. 7.

² E. W. Hopkins, Ethics of India, p. 2 ff.

all things, expressing itself in the order of nature, and in the manifestations of man's religious life and tending to be associated with one supreme God, seems to be full of promise for further religious and ethical development. However, sacrifice and even magic seem to have taken precedence over religion. Sacrifice was originally a simple offering made to fire to please the gods. In course of time it assumed an exaggerated importance. It became an end in itself. As early as the later *saṃhitās* the disintegrating effects of these influences are visible. "The fervour and simplicity of the *Rgvedic* hymn is absent in the later *saṃhitās*, where every hymn is coupled with some particular rite, aiming solely at material advance."³ What is even worse, religious rites are prostituted to the achievement of criminal schemes.⁴ Even truth (*ṛta*) is pedantically equated to exactness in the rites and formulae of sacrifice. What decides the efficacy of sacrifice is its correct mode of performance. The transformation in the role of god Varuṇa as the guardian of *ṛta* in the *Rgveda* to that of a deity in the *brāhmaṇas*, who is constantly ready to catch and to punish any inaccuracy in the ritual, clearly shows the change from the *Rgvedic* *ṛta* as the moral power behind the universe to sacrifice as the all-important power sustaining the universe. "In such hands, sacrifice became a mere mill, mechanically, worked to grind out future rewards as well as present blessings. The rare and expensive sacrifice performed by a king to obtain suzerainty of the land was so efficacious that a single oblation of this sacrifice of the horse (*aśvamedha*) atoned for all sins including that of slaying of a priest."⁵ This tendency of considering sacrifice as an effective atonement for all sins is also carried further by the later law-givers. Sin, viewed quasi-physically is identified with many actions or even passive experiences that have no strictly ethical significance. Communion of sin through physical means was believed in. It is important to observe that throughout the *Atharvaveda* sin is mentioned as something that has always to be expiated. The means of expiation are also physical. Water is especially used for the removal of sin. Plants, uttered spells, amulets and fire, all have similar efficacy. The gods, too, have their place in connection with the release from sin, but theirs is a

³ A. A. Macdonell, *History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 183.

⁴ A. Barth, *Religions of India*, p. 47.

⁵ E. W. Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, p. 60.

subordinate one. The power lies rather in the prayer itself than in the god who is invoked.

The *upanisads*, which represent the later development of vedic thought, are primarily concerned with metaphysical questions. The problem of existence was with them fundamental, the problem of conduct was quite secondary. Moral life was a mere preparation for the higher life of the soul. This indicates that philosophical speculations were valued more and morality was not considered to be the most essential part of philosophy. That is why very meagre ethical data, usually in the form of moral maxims, is found in these treatises.

The *Dharmasūtras* present a fully developed concept of *dharma*. The word *dharma* in these *sūtras* implies a whole code of conduct to maintain the prevalent order. It includes "privileges, duties and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of the Aryan community, as a member of one of the *varṇas* and as a person in a peculiar stage of life."⁶ And since it included a whole conglomeration of established forms of conduct, ethical injunctions were interwoven inextricably with others that have no ethical value. In almost all patterns of behaviour laid down for an individual—social, as a member of a particular *varṇa* or *āśrama*; occupational either as a trader, servant, minister or king; or individual, in his capacity of a father, brother, son or husband—his ethical build-up is never lost sight of. There is always an emphasis upon the ethical aspect of the various *dharmas*, specified as *deśadharmā*, *kāladharma*, *varṇadharmā*, *āśramadharmā* etc. Apart from that, "*dharma*" itself is often defined as consisting of various ethical concepts. Thus, though ethics is not discussed separately and systematically, it is not neglected. We will first examine how far the ethical development of an individual, in whatever station of life he may be, is emphasised in the Epics.

The Epics and especially the didactic portions written after the fashion of the *smṛtis* follow this pattern perfectly. There is hardly a chapter wherein there is no reference to *dharma*. A passing glance over a single *parva* like the *Śāntiparva*, which can be said to hold the gist of the practical teachings of the great Epic, clearly illustrates this. Whatever the theme of discussion may be, even a question like selection of the royal cabinet, the consideration of

⁶ P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstras*, Vol. 1, pp. 1-2.

the primary ethical qualities is always present. We may examine a few specimens out of numerous such references. The 184th chapter of the Śāntiparva, while describing the āśramadharmā of the individual, emphasises the following qualities in a *grhastha*: "Compassion towards all creatures, sweet speech, loving to the ears; abandonment of cruelty, ignorance, pride, hypocrisy and non-violence, truth and peaceful nature, these are the real *tapas* in all the stages of life."⁷ This passage enumerates the active as well as passive virtues and proclaims them to be a sort of *tapas* for an individual in all stages of life.

The concept of *tapas* is essentially ethical. The Gitā defines the three types of *tapas* for a *bhakta* as follows: "Worship of gods, brahmins, preceptors and learned people, purity, straightforwardness, celibacy (*brahmacarya*) and non-violence—these are the physical *tapas*. Sweet speech which distresses none, and which is true, benefactory to others and full of affection along with vedic studies (*svādhyāya*) is called the verbal *tapas*. Natural light-heartedness, gentleness, silence, control over mind, and impartial judgment—these are mental *tapas*." These are the three types of *sāttvika tapas* that a person should faithfully perform without entertaining any desire for fruit."⁸ It should be noted here that worship of gods and brahmins is mixed up with ethical concepts.

A *sanyāsin* on the other hand is advised to concentrate upon the avoidance of the fundamental vices like desire, anger, vanity, lust, pride, violence, etc. which would come in his way of self conquest.⁹ He is also advised to avoid the various social crimes: murder, insult (*niskṛti*), theft, censure, jealousy, violence, cruelty, deceit (*anṛtam*); for one who practises these does not gather any *tapas*, while one who avoids these advances in *tapas*.¹⁰

Coming to the *varṇa* duties of an individual, the Śāntiparva lays down the following ethical behaviour as essential to all the *varṇas*: "Absence of wickedness, pity towards all creatures, non-violence, non-indifference (activeness), performance of *śrāddha* and entertainment of the guests, truth, peace, fidelity to one's wife, contentment, purity, non-jealousy, knowledge of the self, and curiosity—

⁷ Mbh., XII, 184, 14-15; also cf. Mbh., XII, 154, 14-19.

⁸ Gitā, XVII, 14-17.

⁹ Mbh., XII, 185, 3.

¹⁰ Mbh., XII, 185, 17-18.

these are the common *dharma*s of all *varṇas*, O King.”¹¹

In the case of the brahmins these qualities were all the more essential because the basis of their supremacy was their ethical behaviour.¹²

Discussions of kingly duties also include insistence on virtues since a king was supposed to be an ideal to the society : “(A king) should punish without any lethargy, should forgive, should be intelligent, patient, clever, should discriminate between good and bad creatures, protect them, give gifts to all and possess a sweet tongue, should protect the cities and villages along with his subjects.”¹³

The pursuit of a particular *vr̥tti* (occupation) also required a certain standard of behaviour. In the discourse given by Tulādhara to Jājali, the former declares that he followed his profession honestly and deceived not even a child.¹⁴

A person who wanted to achieve God, that is, a *yogin* was supposed to develop the highly ethical qualities of compassion, forbearance, peace, non-violence, truth, fidelity, modesty, curiosity and control of anger.¹⁵

Dharma itself is described as consisting of the ten highest ethical qualities, namely, learnedness, austerity, self-sacrifice, faith, sacrificial ceremony, forbearance, purity of emotions and pity, truth, control of self. “Fix your mind on these and try to acquire them because these are the roots of *dharma*.”¹⁶ Here the ethical virtues like forbearance, truth, faith etc. are mixed up with religious rites and modes of behaviour like sacrifice and austerity and hence the list is not strictly ethical like the one given by Manu,¹⁷ where all the ten qualities are strictly ethical.

All the references given above are but just specimens to indicate that ethics embraced all the departments of life and was in no way passed over or neglected. It should be noted, however, that the Epic does not differentiate clearly between ethics and *dharma* as a

¹¹ Mbh., XII, 285, 23-24; also cf. Mbh., XII, 19, 92-94; Mbh., XII, 227, 5-10; V, 43, 12 etc.

¹² Mbh., XII, 285, 26.

¹³ Mbh., XII, 92, 41-43; cf. XIII, 141, 49-50 (Bom. Ed.); Kautilya, I, 6.

¹⁴ Mbh., XII, 254, 12.

¹⁵ Mbh., XII, 262, 37-38; also cf. XII, 231, 5.

¹⁶ Mbh., XII, 161, 5-6; also cf. XII, 289, 9, 12, 17, 21, 18.

¹⁷ Manu, VI, 92.

whole. "All those who go after *dharma* and are desirous of acquiring *dharma* cannot but do so without developing the following qualities: threefold purity of mind, body and speech, forbearance, patience, truth and memory. They know these to be the commandments common to all *dharmas*."¹⁸

Not only are the ethical virtues considered as the constituents of the various *dharmas*, but their value as the mainsprings of human character has also been recognised. In a discourse between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana, the former says that prosperity can be obtained only by a person of character referring to the example of Yudhiṣṭhira, whose prosperity was making Duryodhana jealous. A very interesting anecdote is here narrated in which the demon Prahlaḍa conquered Indra's empire by dint of his *śīla* (character) declared as "the root of *dharma*, *vratas*, truth and prosperity."¹⁹

In the discussion Dhṛtarāṣṭra further narrates the means to develop high character. "Not to betray any creature physically, mentally or orally, to have mercy and an inclination to give gifts: these are known as *śīla*. An action which does not benefit anybody in this world, but on the contrary leads to shame should not be performed. Only that action should be performed which would lead to praise. This in short is *śīla*, O Duryodhana."²⁰

It should be noted here that though the ethical qualities of truth and *dharma* are declared as the root of *śīla*, the whole matter is somewhat confused by the undue emphasis put upon the necessity of worshipping brahmins—as Prahlaḍa himself emphasizes. However, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, after declaring *adroha* and *anugraha* (two ethical qualities) as the basis of *śīla*, puts undue emphasis over the agreeableness of an action. Elsewhere also we see the same confusion. Thus in the Indra—Bali episode, Lakṣmī declares: "I stay with truth, liberality, *vratas* (vows), bravery and *dharma*." But later she declares that she left the demon-king Bali because he insulted the brahmins and became haughty. In the same passage Indra describes the four-fold abode of Lakṣmī: earth, fire, water and fourthly human beings who respect the brahmins, are truthful and best."²¹

¹⁸ Mbh., XII, 207, 5-6; also cf. XII, 289, 9; 21, 18.

¹⁹ Mbh., XII, 124, 60.

²⁰ Mbh., XII, 124, 63-66.

²¹ Mbh., XII, 221; also cf. 218, 12-15.

It is quite clear that the later priestly touch has confused the real issue of the importance of ethical virtues in an individual with a false importance given to the worship of brahmins. This confusion is also traceable elsewhere, even to a greater extent.²²

That character was an important consideration for deciding the value of man is again visible in the importance given to *sadācāra* (or the behaviour of good people) considered as a source of *dharma*, besides the revealed scriptures (*śrūti*) and tradition (*smṛti*). Whenever the two differ *sadācāra* was to decide the issue. Bhīṣma explains the basis of the *dharma* followed by good people to Yudhiṣṭhira. “*Ācāra* (or proper behaviour) is the main support of *dharma*.” . . . True speech is the best thing in this world because truth supports the whole earth . . . Nor should one try to seize another’s wealth. This is the eternal *dharma* . . . The sages, always bent upon doing good to other people, declare liberality in giving gifts as one of the eternal *dharma*s . . . So a person should so practise the virtues of self-control, liberality, mercy etc. that even the gods may come down at his bidding. Again when he obtains wealth he should indulge in practices like sacrifice, giving of gifts etc. The learned have declared that the action which pleases all is *dharma* while one that displeases is *adharma*. So, know this to be the chief characteristic of *dharma* because providence has created this *dharma* for the welfare of people and hence it is merciful.”²³ Here it can be seen that the upaniṣadic principles of ethics, viz. *dāna*, *dama* and *dayā* (charity, self-control and mercy) along with truth, are reiterated as the proper behaviour of good people. At another place it is mentioned: “Truth, self-control, patience and wisdom are practised by the wise. Aryas declare patience, truth, uprightness and non-injury to be the paramount virtues . . . The secret of wisdom of God is that there is nothing nobler than humanity.” This means that man is himself divine and can by his own exertions, mental and moral, encompass the highest. Here the ethical note is emphasised.²⁴

In accordance with the emphasis on the ethical background of the various aspects of *dharma*, lack of ethical behaviour is considered a breach of *dharma*. Often the various vices are considered to be at

²² Mbh., XIII, 11 (Bom. Ed.)

²³ Mbh., XII, 251, 3 ff. Only the relevant portion is given.

²⁴ Mbh., XII, 288, 1.

the root of all sins of a human being. Lord Kṛṣṇa links the various vices to one another which ultimately lead to destruction.²⁵ Sanat-sujāta enumerates the twelve elemental vices of human beings, headed by anger.²⁶ Arjuna asks, "Goaded by what does a person perform sin, even though unwilling to do so?" The Lord replies, "It is *kāma* (desire or lust) and *krodha* (anger) produced out of *rajas* quality. They are our inborn enemies."²⁷ The *āsuri sampad* (devilish temperament), as opposed to the *daivi sampad* (saintly temperament), enumerates various vices.²⁸ The main vices in the list of Sanatsujāta are: anger (*krodha*), *lobha* (greed), *moha*, insatiableness (*vidhitsu*), cruelty (*akṛpa*), jealousy (*asūyā*), pride (*māna*), sorrow (*śoka*), desire (*sprhā*), lack of sportsmanship (*irsyā*), and censure of others (*jugupsā*). Gītā further declares that his devilish temperament binds an individual to the wheel of *samsāra*, while the development of a saintly character leads him to salvation.²⁹ The destructive effect of such vices on the individual is described in the passage referred to above, in which it is shown how proximity leads to desire, desire to anger, anger to unbalanced temperament, unbalanced mind to a loss of intellect, and finally to destruction.³⁰ Thus, the whole ethical build-up of the character of an individual, including the equilibrium and tranquillity of his mental make-up crumbles down when the influences of these vices overpower him.

To avoid this ultimate destruction, non-attachment (*asanga*) or a detached outlook on worldly affairs is advocated by the Epic. "Non-attachment leads to the foundation of an individual's welfare. It is the highest knowledge. By developing a detached attitude of mind no merit is lost."³¹

The description of the *rāksasas* that is met with in Rāmāyaṇa strengthens the conclusions based on the data of the Mahābhārata. Most of the *rāksasas* have to their credit a store of religious merit won by their austerities in addition to boons granted by gods, but in spite of this, their unethical behaviour which upsets the peace

²⁵ Gītā, II, 62-63; XVI, 10, 21-22.

²⁶ Mbh., V, 43, 7.

²⁷ Gītā, III, 36-37.

²⁸ Gītā, XVI, 1-3; 7-20; 5.

²⁹ Gītā, XVI, 5.

³⁰ Gītā, II, 62-63; also cf. Mbh., XII, 152, 4-10; 265, 4-8; 270, 24-26; Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, VI, 44.

³¹ Mbh., XII, 283, 3.

and tranquillity of society leads them to destruction.

The instances of persons like Satyakāma Jābāla, Aitareya, the son of Itarā and *dasīputra* Rohadas show that in spite of a low origin these people were loved, respected and were considered worthy of giving advice because of their integrity of character.³²

Typical of the Epic tendency of popularising ideals by valuing them as actions bringing merit, the ethical virtues are often represented as meritorious actions (*punya*) leading to heaven. In the above discussion about *śīla* it has already been pointed out how these ethical virtues are a means to attain prosperity. The Anuśāsana parva (Chapter 11) also, as referred to earlier, describes Lakṣmī as choosing her residence amongst men possessing, among other things, a highly ethical character with virtues like control of senses, control of anger, *karma* etc. However, the same *parva* mentions these virtues as a means for achieving various ends—losing all their intrinsic value thereby. “If one desires long life one must practise *brahmacarya*, if beauty, health and prosperity one must follow non-violence, by giving gifts one obtains wealth, by observing silence one obtains power, by renunciation one obtains pleasure, by truth and fasting one obtains heaven and by *brahmacarya* a power to act as one pleases.”³³

This lowering of ethical concepts as merchandise to be bargained for material advantage is somewhat redeemed by the growing ideal of self-realisation leading to emancipation after death instead of heaven or hell as the result of man's action. This self-realisation was achieved by the destruction of illusion (*avidyā*). And, as already referred to, a *yogin* or a *sanyāsin* who was an aspirant of the knowledge of *brahman*, is advised to develop the ethical qualities often mentioned. Thus, a further step is taken when the ethical practices—instead of being cheap articles of merchandise to be bartered in return for some other worldly gain—became a stepping-stone to higher knowledge. Thus they served as means for the

³² One thing may be noted, however, that this respect did not help them in improving their *varṇa* position. This fact is discussed in detail elsewhere.

³³ Mbh., XIII, 7, 14-17 (Bom. Ed.); also cf. XII, 127, 9-10; XIII, 144, 5 (Bom. Ed.). Where ethical qualities like truth are equated with sacrificial acts like the performance of *aśvamedha* both fetching the same merit viz. heaven.

achievement of the supreme end, emancipation. "Knowledge without morality is as futile as morality without knowledge." Both are to be gained by human effort. "Ethical behaviour works to effect the purity which brings to man one-ness with God as all pure."³⁴

A third and the greatest step towards the ethical development is taken when the Gītā preaches the philosophy of *karmayoga*. The Lord differentiates the ways of self-realisation, viz., path of knowledge and path of action, and declares that the path of action is the better way to attain self-realisation.³⁵ According to this philosophy no person can live without performing action. So all attempts at renunciation of action, considering it to be causing a bondage for the soul, are futile.³⁶ The best way then was to perform the actions that fell to one's lot. But in order to evade the consequences arising out of this activity, a person should perform it simply as a duty without any attachment or expectation towards the result of the action performed. This indifference towards the result of the action (*karmafala*) was *yoga*.³⁷ There can be no doubt that we have here a conception which marks a great advance in ethical doctrine. "The noblest morality has perhaps always been the outcome of men following right because it is right in the scorn of consequences."³⁸

The mental detachment required for *karmayoga* was to be acquired by practice and, as the Lord declares very often, an individual was required to put forth attempts lasting not only over a lifetime but even beyond. And after the repeated efforts of many lives, a person who achieved this state of mind attained oneness with God.³⁹ The Gītā describes the character of such an emancipated soul at many places under the different names of *sthitaprajña*, *triguṇātīta*, *yogī*, etc. Arjuna asks: "O Keśava, what are the characteristics of a *sthitaprajña*? What is the nature of his speech, what his posture, and his behaviour?" The Lord replies: "A person is known as a *sthitaprajña* when he casts off all desires and is satisfied with his own self. He neither sulks at pain nor

³⁴ E. W. Hopkins, *Ethics of India*, p. 183.

³⁵ Gītā, III, 3 and XII, 12.

³⁶ Gītā, III, 4, 5.

³⁷ Gītā, II, 47, 48.

³⁸ J. S. MacKenzie, *Hindu Ethics*, p. 126.

³⁹ Gītā, VI, 45.

rejoices in pleasure. He is devoid of attachment, fear and anger. Such a sage is *sthitaprajna*. He loves everybody and remains unperturbed in spite of misery or happiness. Like a tortoise withdrawing its limbs under its shell, such a person withdraws his senses from objects of pleasures of the senses. And the desire for pleasures of senses also is renounced, after one achieves oneness with the supreme reality . . . A person who renounces all desires, is without any attachment or pride, attains peace."⁴⁰ It can be seen here that a complete control of senses and a perfect mental detachment towards worldly objectives are the main theme. A similar emphasis is found in the descriptions of a *triguṇātita* person⁴¹ and a person who is imbued with yoga (*yogārūḍha*).⁴² The *sāttvika prakṛti* is thus described : "A person who is born with a noble temperament is born with the following qualities. He is not afraid of anybody. He is pure in mind, established in knowledge and *yoga* (performance of actions), charitable, with senses controlled, a performer of sacrifice and studies the *vedas* regularly (*svādhyāya*). He is devoted to austerities (*tapas*), is simple, non-violent, truthful, gentle (without anger), detached towards the fruits of actions, tranquil, merciful, controlled, soft-hearted, modest, steady, brilliant, patient, saintly, unbiassed and without any pride. These twenty-six qualities are the ingredients of the *sāttvika prakṛti*. As opposed to these, hypocrisy, pride, vanity, anger, hard-heartedness and ignorance, these are the ingredients of a demoniacal temperament (*āsurī sampad*)."⁴³ It can be seen here that all the ethical qualities are emphasized as the necessary ingredients of a noble character in contrast to the non-ethical qualities possessed by a person of a demoniacal temperament. Thus a higher stage of spiritualisation of man means the highest stage or ethical development.

Besides the paths of knowledge and action, the *Gītā* also points out an easier way of attaining emancipation, the path of devotion (*bhakti*). This path is easier to follow than the one described above and a person who faithfully devotes himself to the Lord attains emancipation not only easily but quickly.⁴⁴ Even a person who is of

⁴⁰ *Gītā*, II, 54 ff.

⁴¹ *Gītā*, XIV, 22-25.

⁴² *Gītā*, VI, 2-4.

⁴³ *Gītā*, XVI, 1-4.

⁴⁴ *Gītā*, XII, 6-7.

a low origin, if he were to take refuge in the Lord, is emancipated.⁴⁵ This statement does not mean that ethical development of an individual was of no importance and a person could be liberated only by force of devotion, but only he, who developed the following characteristics could be a true devotee of the Lord. "That devotee of mine who does not envy any creatures, is friendly towards all, merciful, without attachment, indifferent to happiness and unhappiness, forgiving, contented, bent upon action (*yoganistha*) and with a controlled mind is dear to me. That person who is afraid of nobody and of whom nobody is afraid is dear to me, that devotee of mine who is desireless, pure, clever, impartial, free of distress, and unattached is dear to me. He is dear to me who is neither happy, nor distressed, is not jealous, is detached towards good as well as evil and is devoted to me. One who looks upon a friend as well as an enemy with impartiality and is equally balanced in censure as well as praise, who is not moved by passion, is stable-minded and devoted is dear to me. Those devotees who follow the said *dharma* are very dear to me."⁴⁶ This devotee is also to perform actions dedicating all of them to the Lord.⁴⁷

When an individual achieves a higher stage of spiritualization which, as we have noticed above, coincided with the highest ethical development of the individual, he should not cease functioning but should continue the worldly functions allotted to him. Firstly, for the welfare of society, following the example of the Lord himself and secondly, to set the ideal of exemplary behaviour before those members of society who were still on a lower plane.⁴⁸ The Lord clearly establishes that activity is essential to the welfare of society. In reply to a question put by Arjuna, he declares, "The path of renunciation (*sanyāsa*) and the path of action (*karmayoga*) both are good for a seeker of truth—but of the two, the path of action excels over the path of renunciation."⁴⁹ The path of action consisting of detached actions as interpreted by Gītā includes the path of renunciation because according to Gītā the true renunciation (*tyāga*) consists in not discarding actions but in discarding the

⁴⁵ Gītā, IX, 30-32.

⁴⁶ Gītā, XII, 13-20.

⁴⁷ Gītā, XVIII, 56-57.

⁴⁸ Gītā, III, 20.

⁴⁹ Gītā, V, 2.

desire for the fruits of action.⁵⁰ Thus, here is a happy blending of the path of action and the path of renunciation.

The ethical standard achieved by an individual is not discarded as useless but is made to serve the purpose of social welfare by continuing the functions.

However, the following considerations remain to be explained. Firstly, the selection of the activity (*svadharma*) is not left to individual choice but is already decided by his actions in previous birth and it had to be continued, even though one may feel it to be repugnant to one's ethical judgment. To swerve from it would be a breach in the perfect behaviour which was to be expected from an ideal person and would be a great sin according to the social morals of the age. Thus, however cruel and ghastly the slaying of one's relative may be, a *ksatriya* had to do it as *svadharma*. Arjuna's detachment from warfare before and Yudhiṣṭhira's frustration after the great war are both censured even though they were genuine if looked at from the point of view of non-violence. However non-ethical the idea of butchering the animals may be violating the oft-repeated ethical precept of non-injury to any living creature, Dharmavyādha had to follow it as a *svadharma*. How apologetic he is about his occupation is seen when he tries to defend his position by saying that he does not actually slay the animals but only sells the meat. Not only that, but an attempt is made to reconcile the incompatibility by explaining away the allotment of such a profession involving violence to the lot of an ethical personality like Dharmavyādha as a consequence of misbehaviour in his previous life.⁵¹ Gītā's view about *svadharma* can be noted in the dogmatic statement: "There is more happiness in following one's own *dharma* without any excellence, than going after another's *dharma* par excellence. It is happier to die performing one's own *dharma* because another's *dharma* brings danger."⁵² This dogmatic emphasis on *svadharma* is to be found in Gītā perhaps because it does not attach any importance to the function of an individual. Only the motive behind the action, viz., whether it is performed with perfect detachment or not is to be considered. This indirectly leads us to the conclusion that it is the individual motive and the

⁵⁰ Gītā, XVIII, 2.

⁵¹ Mbh., III, 205, 21 ff.; 206, 1-8.

⁵² Gītā, III, 35.

individual character that is put to judgment rather than the action itself. This indicates a great stride into the development of ethical concepts. In the actual Epic narrative this aspect of judging a function by the underlying motive is absolutely absent. An action is praised or judged simply from the effects it produces. Curses are flung at simple actions done unknowingly. This is apparent from the instances of Daśaratha who is cursed for his unintentional murder of Śravaṇa, Kaṇva who is cursed for unknowingly killing a cow, and Pāṇḍu who is cursed for killing a sage in the disguise of a deer. While on the other hand a hunter is rewarded with heaven for the unintentional killing of a blind animal that was a menace to the society. "At lower stages of civilization there is a considerable lack of discrimination between intentional injuries and accidental ones. Moral judgments are largely influenced by external events involved in or resulting from the conduct of men..."⁵³ Gītā on the other hand shifts the emphasis from the action to the motive marking a definite progress in the ethical development which "develops from the judgment on external acts to the judgment on their inner purpose and character."⁵⁴ Though, from the point of view of social justice, where an individual should be free to choose his occupation, the doctrine of *svadharma* can hardly be justified.

Gītā is not an isolated work preaching the philosophy of action as opposed to the path of renunciation preached mainly by the *upaniṣads*. The same theory is depicted in the Epics and the other contemporary *smṛti* literature. The *Mahābhārata* discusses these two parallel trends; one favouring the path of renunciation embodied in the *sanyāsa*—the fourth stage of life—and the other favouring the path of action embodied in the *gṛhastha*, the second stage of life, and clearly shows its preference for the latter. There were some circles, especially those of philosophers following the upaniṣadic line of thought, who recommended renunciation, advocating the ascetic way of life as a necessity to achieve concentration on the highest reality. The *Śāntiparva* of the *Mahābhārata* has many such discussions expounding such a view either by itself or in comparison with the opposite view advocating action.⁵⁵

⁵³ E. Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity*, pp. 163-64.

⁵⁴ J. S. MacKenzie, *A Manual of Ethics*, p. 102.

⁵⁵ *Mbh.*, XII, 260 ff., 187; 284; 295; 60; 61.

Specially noteworthy in this respect is the dialogue between a father and a son. Medhāvī, the son of a brahmin, asked his father: "O father, the life of human beings is becoming shorter and shorter every day. Knowing this, what remedy should a wise man resort to? Please explain that to me so that I may practise that *dharma*." The father advised him to follow the four *āśramas* in their consecutive order. The son said: "Why should I waste my time in climbing the ladder of life step by step? I will not procreate, because my progeny is not going to liberate me. A person who has got his speech and mind under control, and in whom resides austerity, renunciation and *yoga* can achieve anything. Again, the scriptures say there is no sharper eye and higher truth than the knowledge of reality. There is no greater misery than attachment and no greater happiness than renunciation. To stay alone, to look upon everybody as equal, to follow the path of truth, and to behave well, to renounce violence and achieve simplicity by renouncing all actions, are the greatest possessions of a brahmin. O brahmin, when you will die, of what use will your wealth, relatives or wife be to you? So try to realise the self staying in the heart and think of the way where your fathers and forefathers have departed."⁵⁶

Here it can be seen that a direct preference is shown for the path of renunciation as against the path of action that was to be followed by a *grhastha*. Not only that, but sacrificial routine that a *grhastha* had to follow is condemned in so many specific words when the son says, "An intelligent man as I am, how can I be ready to perform sacrifices fit to be performed only by *ksatriyas* in which violence is committed and the fruit received by the performance of which, is perishable."

It is perhaps with the same thought that Yudhiṣṭhira, the incarnation of *dharma*, advocated *sanyāsa* when he saw the destruction he and his army caused by following the duty of a *ksatriya*.⁵⁷ He also censured the *varṇadharmā* and said that renunciation is only way to achieve *mokṣa*.

The same idea recurs in the *Parāśara Gītā* when the sage declares "A person staying in the *grhastha* stage of life is constantly associated with the *rajas* and *tamas* qualities and hence becomes attached

⁵⁶ Mbh., XII, 277, 5 ff. (Bom. Ed.) Not mentioned in the critical edition.

⁵⁷ Mbh., XIII, 7, 9 (Bom. Ed.)

to the various worldly objects. But a person, who has acquired the knowledge of *brahman*, and is desirous of performing good actions without expecting the merit accruing thereby, and renounces the actions that are forbidden though they may yield fruit, attains eternal bliss. O King, everyone is disgusted with worldly affairs when the wife or the children meet with death or he himself suffers from disease and then he becomes desirous of attaining the knowledge of the self. To satisfy that desire, he studies the scriptures and after a deep study he decides that austerity is the most advantageous of all."⁵⁸ This is also the underlying thought of many other passages in the Epic which indirectly advocate *sanyāsa*.⁵⁹

Sage Kapila discusses this important problem in a somewhat roundabout and lengthy manner in the Kapila Gītā.⁶⁰ Unlike the other discussions cited, though he agrees that the four stages of life are but four different roads leading to a single aim, viz., *moksa*, he emphasises that due to the difference in the merit that is acquired by pursuing the various paths, one is preferred to the others.⁶¹ And after discussing the pros and cons of the particular question and admitting the importance of the *grasthāśrama*, full of activity in the interest of social welfare, he nonetheless emphasizes in very clear terms that from the individual's point of view, *sanyāsa* is the only way to achieve eternal bliss. And he says, "It is good to obtain worldly prosperity and other things by pursuing the active *grhastha* life and one may obtain *moksa* through it, but you know it very well that eternal bliss that is achieved by a *sanyāsin* is never obtained by a *grhastha*." Kapila further illustrates his principle, that of preferring austerities to sacrifices, by the story of a brahmin and his protector Kuṇḍadhara, a messenger of the gods.⁶² A brahmin wanted to perform various sacrifices as laid down by the scriptures with a desire to attain heaven but poor as he was, he could not follow his desire. But due to the boon granted to him through the good offices of Kuṇḍadhara, his mind was so much fixed upon *dharma* that he acquired the great power of austerity

⁵⁸ Mbh., XII, 284, 2-12.

⁵⁹ Mbh., XII, 161, 43-48; 176, 4 ff.; 177; 178 and 179.

⁶⁰ Mbh., XII, 260 ff.

⁶¹ Mbh., 260, 14.

⁶² Mbh., XII, 263 ff.

which enabled him to bestow wealth and prosperity on others, and the power of wandering at his desire in all the regions.

Sulabhā also wins a victory over King Janaka when both enter into discussion about the relative merits of *sanyāsa* and *grhashta-dharma*.⁶³ At the end of the discussion, Janaka admits, that as soon as the futility of the world is realised, one should renounce the world.

As opposed to this view, a strong oft-quoted view prevailed that though *sanyāsa* was the stage of life by following which the attainment of *moksa* was made easy, *grhashtāśrama* was a stage equally important and that to attain *moksa* one had to go through the four stages of life successively in their proper order. The four stages of life are likened to a ladder or proper training ground for the further development of an individual's character. But the Epic goes a step further and as a reaction to the sentiments expressed in favour of *sanyāsa*, an equal importance is attached to the *grhashta* stage of life declaring that the *grhashta* stage in itself was self-sufficient for the achievement of *moksa*, and not only that but it was impossible for a person who ignored it to achieve *moksa*.

The main argument put forward in favour of the *grhashta* stage of life is that the persons in this stage of life are the main supporters of society excluding the *sanyāsins*. It is due to their unceasing activities and industry that the person enjoying the other three stages of life were supported. Sage Syumaraśmi while defending the relative position of the *grhashtāśrama*, puts forward the same argument. He says, "To achieve a proper equilibrium of mind in misery as well as happiness, is a necessary step towards achieving *moksa*, it should also be noted that without taking resort to the *grhashta* stage of life, one does not achieve this state of mind. Just as all the creatures are dependent on their mother for their life, so are all the other *āśramas* dependent upon the *grhashta* stage of life."⁶⁴ Not only that, but it is maintained that people try to avoid this stage of life because of their laziness to shoulder the great responsibility. Thus it is said, "Those lazy and ignorant people who have no faith and wisdom and who have no foresight and social reputation, renounce this world only because they get tired of their worldly duties."⁶⁵ Bhīma echoes the same opinion when he rebukes

⁶³ Mbh., XII, 308 ff.

⁶⁴ Mbh., XII, 261, 5 ff.

⁶⁵ Mbh., XII, 161, 10.

his elder brother for his weakness to shoulder the responsibility of the kingdom. Contemptuously he declares, "It is true that a person staying in the forest can stay peacefully because he is not supposed to maintain his family, *ṛsis*, guests or the ancestors, but their life is like that of animals." And then he further shows the futility of forest life, declaring that if that would be the only means to attain liberation, even wild animals and fish as well as mountains and forests would have won it.⁶⁶ The queen of Janaka - Videhi also gets angry, when her husband tries to go to forest, shirking all the responsibility of the kingdom and his household, and angrily she declares, "O King, all creatures in this world are bound by the fetters in form of the fruits of actions committed in their previous life. So it is doubtful as to when one may get liberated. You, who are desirous of living alone, leaving behind your dutiful, religious-minded queens, are absolutely a sinner and there would be no place for you in this life as well as the other."⁶⁷

Thus it is seen that there was a section of society which locked down upon *sanyāsa* from a different point of view. According to them, it was simply avoiding the responsibility which a person owed to the society in which he lived, and towards the family in which he was born and bred.

Another reason for advocating the *grhastha* stage of life was for progeny. It was essential for each individual to have a son of his own and that not being possible, any other type of son allowed by the rules of *dharma* who would perform *śrāddha* for him after his death and keep him away from hell. This necessity of having a son is often stressed in the Epics.⁶⁸ Thus to repay the debt that one owed to the forefathers by birth, it was essential to contract a marriage and to produce a son so that the family line may continue and the forefathers may receive their *pinda*s (funeral oblations) regularly and thus unendingly. If one failed to repay this debt, it was very natural that he was considered slack in performing his duties and would naturally lose religious merit to that extent. And those who did not satisfy their ancestors who were next to gods, committed such a sin that they would surely go to the lowest region after their death. The Epic illustrates this principle by more

⁶⁶ Mbh., XII, 10, 22 ff.

⁶⁷ Mbh., XII, 18, 13-15.

⁶⁸ Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 107, 10-16.

than one illustration where sages, with great austerities to their credit, are refused merit because they have not satisfied their ancestors.

Identical in content and implication are the stories of Jaratkāru⁶⁹ and Mandapāla⁷⁰. They vividly bring out the futility of austerities, sacrifices and asceticism—for they are all subordinate. "None of these things are equal to progeny. A child is the greatest of religious merits." In spite of the greatest of austerities, he who does not produce children goes to hell—for there is no one to perform *śrāddha* for him. Hence the importance of the *grhastha* stage.

The upholding of the *grhastha* stage of life was mainly due to the temporal aspect involved in the pursuit of various occupations by which one could earn money and the performance of various sacrifices in which one could spend that wealth and gain heaven. And while achieving one's own material gain this way, a *grhastha* could manage to oblige society by entertaining guests, giving gifts and performing sacrifices wherein brahmins got big fees.

As opposed to this, *sanyāsa* preached simple living and high thinking, and as an ideal it was the best but most difficult to be followed. Besides, the society as such was neglected in concentrating upon the individual and it might have been possible that many who wanted to avoid the responsibility of maintaining a family and supporting the society might have taken recourse to *sanyāsa* as an escape from the realities of life and not because they really cared for higher reality.

The *grhastha* stage as well as the *sanyāsa* were both equally important in the moral development of the individual. One taught him how to be unselfish and share his property with everybody and thus to realise his moral responsibility of protecting and preserving other creatures; the other taught him how to discipline his own self. Both were not at variance with each other but were complementary to each other. Gītā brought out this fact by defining the various types of devotees who had disciplined themselves to a state of mental equilibrium while performing the worldly actions; and what is even more, it offered a blending of the better elements of both the stages.

According to the new turn given by Gītā, the path of non-action.

⁶⁹ Mbh., I, 14 and 15.

⁷⁰ Mbh., I, 220, 5-14.

and the path of action were both good for a seeker of *mokṣa*; but of the two, the path of action was preferred by the Lord because nobody can renounce action completely.⁷¹ Here, apparently, the *Gītā* seems to be favouring the *pravṛtti mārga* and hence the *gṛhastha* stage of life, but it is not completely the case as in the cases discussed above. The path of action as preached by *Gītā* has a definiteness of its own. According to it, everybody should perform one's duty without expecting the fruit thereof. It was *adharma* to be non-active and not to perform one's duty as well as to do it and to expect something out of it. So the ideal of renunciation is not discarded. It is included in and made a part of the active life. Whatever action such a person performs, it is for the welfare of the society and not for his own pleasure. The highest ideal of *gṛhasthāśrama*—welfare of the society—is blended with the ideal of *sanyāsa*, complete detachment, and a person who blended the two was a real *yogi*.

This subtle viewpoint of the *Gītā* is also noticeable in a dialogue between Indra, in the guise of a bird, and the brahmin youths who sought renunciation at a very young age.⁷² Indra here advocates the difficult path of *karma*, declaring that a brahmin, who performs actions in accordance with the *vedas* attains heaven, and that one can perform such actions only in the *gṛhastha* stage. The advocacy of Indra does not discard the lower types of actions representing ritualistic activity. On the contrary, it combines with them the actions performed with the full realisation of one's responsibility towards family and society. Also the performance of action is provided with an ideology of the realisation of the highest truth and is called *tapas*.

This ideology is well illustrated by the dialogue between Jājāli and Tulādhara, who besides serving as the best illustration of the performance of *varṇadharma*s points out to Jājāli the futility of his austerities and the pride that he took thereof. A close study of the description of his own life that Tulādhara gives, shows that he followed the *Gītā*'s philosophy of performing one's duty with detachment, without injuring anybody. Moreover, the importance of activity is fully realised by the Epic writer. A stagnant society always dies. Only that society which understands the value of

⁷¹ *Gītā*, V, 2.

⁷² *Mbh.*, XII, 11, 11 ff.

co-operation and guides its activity along those lines survives in strife. And so he declares, "Activity is at the root of all the nations." Besides this the Gītā itself puts forward the conception of "*lokasangraha*." It is not necessary for a detached person who has already achieved oneness with the supreme *Brahman* to perform any actions but this they must do, to set an example to the society. Lord Kṛṣṇa himself being the supreme reality does so for the welfare of the society. Thus the fact that social welfare is the ultimate aim of an individual as *grhasṭha* is stressed everywhere.

If considered in this light it is obvious that the importance of *grhasṭhāśrama*, not only as the best but the only *āśrama* supporting the other three, is not exaggerated and the Epic spares no words to flatter this position of *grhasṭhāśrama*. It repeats off and on that *grhasṭhāśrama* is the best *āśrama*. Not only that but a *grhasṭha* who executes all his responsibility as shown above need not worry about other *āśramas* but attains heaven by the virtue of the merit earned in it.⁷³

The Epics further seek to resolve the conflict between the path of action (*pravṛtti*) and the path of renunciation (*nivṛtti*) which has always faced Hinduism by presenting the system of *āśramas* for the purpose of the highest spiritual and ethical development of the individual. These four stages of life are said to be the four steps of a ladder and by climbing them one by one, a person can reach the summit, viz., emancipation.

The scheme provides a proper balancing of the four aims of life, viz., *artha*, *kāma*, *dharma* and *mokṣa*. Accepting the three motives, viz., *artha*, *kāma* and *dharma*, as the incentives for all the worldly activities, the Epic emphasizes that these motives should be so guided that they may lead to the ultimate realisation of the inner spirituality—the aim of human life.⁷⁴ The whole essence of the Mahābhārata is said to consist in upholding this principle as declared in the famous verse well known as the *bhārata sāvitrī*: "With raised hands I proclaim that *artha* and *kāma* are for the sake of *dharma*, then why not follow *dharma*? But alas! nobody listens to me."

Of course this proper balancing of all the worldly activities and maintaining the perfect righteous social behaviour is an extremely difficult task to be achieved by individuals. The Epic does not

⁷³ Mbh., XII, 12, 12.

⁷⁴ Mbh., I, 87, 4; XII, 123; 161, 5-9.

ignore this fact. In the lamentations of the unhappy brahmin of Ekacakrā the Epic writer records the views of the common man towards this higher philosophy and the difficulty in achieving that perfect balance. Thus he says, "In this world the life itself which is a source of constant unhappiness is worthless. An individual has to achieve *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*, all the three single-handed and thus he is miserable, and if he does not strive to obtain that then also he is miserable. Some consider *moksa* to be the best of all, but that is most difficult to be obtained and pursuing only *artha* leads to hell."⁷⁵ This dilemma of a common man is solved by the scheme of *āśrama*, which helps the evolution of personality through stages, higher and higher till it attains the ideal.⁷⁶

To recapitulate, we have traced the gradual ethical development as furnished by the data scattered over the didactic portions of the Epics. It has been shown how a gradual evolution had come about. Firstly, by confusing ethical and non-ethical characteristics of an individual in the form of virtues and vices with good actions fetching religious merit leading to heaven etc., or vices as sins leading to hell; secondly, by evaluating the ethical virtuosity of an individual as a stepping stone to higher knowledge leading to salvation; thirdly, by evaluating the ethical virtuosity for its own intrinsic value; and fourthly, by the system of *āśrama* as a regulator of the individual's life, by properly balancing its varied interests in the terms of *dharma* or ethical virtuosity.

⁷⁵ Mbh., I, 157, 20-23 (Bom. Ed.)

⁷⁶ F. H. Giddings, "The function of social organisation always to be kept in view by the sociologist is the evolution of the personality through even higher stages until it attains the ideal that we call humanity."—Principles of Sociology, p. 241.

CHAPTER XI

ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT (2)

It is argued that the later morality was higher and stricter than that of a former age, or at least the didactic morality was. The Epic has added chapters after chapters at variance with earlier feelings and customs, teaching abhorrence of wrong acts, from a point of view often of sternest right; and often devices have been found to overshadow the non-ethical element of the earlier legends.

One section of the moral code deals with what may be called a formal code of fighting (*dharmayudhdha*) that inculcates a law more humane than was possibly consistent with the practices of older times even in warfare. The *ksatriyas* were enjoined military activities for the protection of *dharma*. These military activities were, however, to be followed in accordance with the rules formed to regulate the warfare and only such warfare was called a *dharmayudhdha*. Though the concept is still in its evolutionary stage in the Epics, it became a Hindu tradition which was followed by the Rajput kings in their wars with the Mohmedan invaders, but for which the history of India would have been different.

These rules were framed in the context of *varṇa*, sex or age of the person participating in a combat. As a rule, brahmins, women and children were not killed even though they caused harm.¹ Any instance of killing brahmins, women and children is clearly marked out with feeling of aversion. Thus when Viśvāmitra orders Rāma to kill Tāḍakā, he has to justify, that killing of Tāḍakā would not involve any sin, she being a menace to *dharma* and society.² He also mentions instances of women being killed with this motive formerly. Rāmāyaṇa³ records how Indra killed Bhṛgu's wife and was cursed for his deed. Lakṣmaṇa did not kill Śūparṇakhā but punished her by cutting her nose and ears, because she was a woman. Rāvaṇa's ministers advised him not to kill Sītā because she was a

¹ Mbh., II, 38, 13; XII, 133, 13-15; VI, 143, 68 (Bom. Ed.)

² Rāmāyaṇa, Balakāṇḍa, 25, 17-22.

³ Rāmāyaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, 51, 11-15.

woman.⁴ The feeling against the killing of women is so strong that the brahmin woman of Ekacakrā hoped that the *rāksasa* Baka, being conversant with the Aryan law would not kill her.⁵ Of course women were captured as war booties. The rule about women and children can be understood when we consider their inferiority as regards physical strength. The brahmin was made an exception due to his peculiar position as the head of the society and the particular privileges he enjoyed as such. The murder of Droṇa by Dhṛṣṭadyumna in the Mahābhārata war is censured.⁶ A glimpse of the age, when this brahmanic superiority is not established, is obtained when Bhīma congratulates Dhṛṣṭadyumna for his killing Droṇa. He says, "O Dhṛṣṭadyumna, I am embracing you just now with much pleasure and thus will again embrace you when the sinful Duryodhana and Karna will be killed." The passage in which even the warriors of the Pāṇḍavas' side shout to Dhṛṣṭadyumna not to kill Droṇa must be a later version when the priestly claim to supremacy was accepted. Rāmāyaṇa confirms this tradition when Rāma says to Paraśurāma, "I will not kill you as you are a brahmin, but this arrow of mine will not go unaimed. Tell me where to shoot."⁷ Finally the Mahābhārata lists brahmins among persons not to be killed, and terms the killing of brahmin as heinous sin.⁸

But if a brahmin—even if he be a learned preceptor—attacks with a raised weapon first, then there was no blemish in counterattacking. The Epic repeats the rules laid down by Śukrācārya saying, "The king bent upon religion should punish that brahmin according to his *dharma* because a king, who kills such a brahmin protects the religion and does not incur any sin."⁹ Another rule enjoined that, when an enemy laid down his arms and sought shelter, even though it might be for a short time, without surrendering himself and without declaring cessation of enmity; he was not to be treated as an enemy. Duryodhana had been captured by a *gandharva*. While Bhīma was overjoyed at Duryodhana's sad

⁴ Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, 93, 59-60.

⁵ Mbh., I, 146, 30.

⁶ Mbh., VI, 192, 47; also cf. 192, 68 (Bom. Ed.)

⁷ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 76, 5-6.

⁸ Mbh., XII, 34, 4; 35, 2-3 (Bom. Ed.); cf. Manu, 11, 54.

⁹ Mbh., VIII, 91, 111-114 (Bom. Ed.); VI, 107, 73-79.

plight, Yudhiṣṭhira who was always a model of religious behaviour, relenting him, indicated, what the true behaviour of a *ksatriya* should be: "The rescue of an enemy from trouble is equal in merit to obtaining a boon, a kingdom and a son."¹⁰ Here Yudhiṣṭhira clearly lays down the principle that, even an enemy was to be protected, if he asked for protection.

The Epic abounds in instances where the *ksatriya* heroes offered protection to persons who sought it, even at the cost of their life. The classical instance is that of the famous king Śibi, who saved a pigeon from the clutches of a hawk, at the cost of his own life.¹¹ He declares: "If a person were to hand over a frightened person seeking his protection, it will not rain in his country and the seeds will not grow in time. The progeny of such a person die early; *pitṛs* never stay in his house and gods do not accept his offerings." When Vibhīṣaṇa seeks refuge with Rāma's side, Sugrīva raises a doubt about the intentions of Vibhīṣaṇa and advises Rāmā not to accept him as a protege. But Ārya Rāma would follow no such advice. He accepts Vibhīṣaṇa just because he had asked refuge, whatever his intention may be, remarking, "And can I, O Vānara King, forget the great universal debt; ever to welcome those, who pray for shelter—friends or foes? Strike not the suppliant, when he stands and asks thee with beseeching hand for shelter, strike him not although he were thy father's mortal foe... The shelter which he comes to seek should cost thy life in desperate need. And shall I hear the wretched cry and my protecting aid deny? Shall I a suppliant's prayer refuse and heaven and glory basely lose?"¹²

A *ksatriya* had to give a fight to anybody who challenged him to save his honour; but in official combats arranged specially for spectacular purpose, persons of equal birth as well as valour only could be rivals. When the Kaurava princes were exhibiting their art of using weapons as Droṇa had taught them, to their elders and other members of the nobility, Karṇa, an outsider challenged Arjuna for a duel. Kṛpācārya who was proficient in the rules and regulations of duel fighting first asked the family from which Karṇa had descended, and on knowing that he was of a low origin forbade

¹⁰ Mbh., III, 232, 10-12.

¹¹ Mbh., III, 197 ff. (Bom. Ed.) also cf. XIII, 122 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

¹² Rāmāyaṇa, VI, 18, Trans. by Griffith, p. 440.

Arjuna to accept his challenge.¹³ In the duel between Jarāsandha and Bhīma also, though all the three—Bhīma, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa—had gone to former's capital in disguise, they revealed their true identity before their enemy and allowed him to choose his own rival. Jarāsandha of course chose Bhīma who was of equal strength.¹⁴ So did Duryodhana, when he is offered a chance to choose his own weapon and his own rival in the last duel fight of the Mahābhārata war by Yudhiṣṭhira. Of course this magnanimity on the part of Dhārmaraāja is strictly censured by the practical Kṛṣṇa.¹⁵

This rule of fighting an equal was followed in big battles also. The Epic¹⁶ lays down that all the encounters must be between equals as far as possible and there should be no deceit. A soldier should fight with a soldier, a cavalier with a cavalier, an elephant rider with an elephant rider, a charioteer with a charioteer and so on. Similarly, only an armed person was to be attacked and that too, only after a due warning. A person should not be attacked if he was not properly armed or was unaware of the attack. A person who was tired, unconscious or wounded should not be attacked, nor should a person who had lost his weapon and chariot during the fight, should be taken advantage of. Neither of the parties should take recourse to secret weapons, like poisoned arrows, looking apparently innocent, but really dangerous. Those persons whose business was not fighting but who acted as charioteers, bugle-bearers or burden-bearers etc. were not to be killed.

Bhīma seem to sum up the war-ethics when he says, "I do not like to fight with a man who has thrown away his weapon, who has discarded his armour and flag, who is running away from the battle-field, who is frightened, who comes saying, 'I come under your protection', who is a woman or holds a woman's name, who is unconscious, who has only one son and who is a characterless fellow"¹⁷ Similarly, Kṛpācārya also advises Āsvatthāmā bent upon killing the much tired and sleeping Pāṇcālas at the time of night saying : "Those, who are asleep, have renounced weapons, who do not possess chariots and horses, who declare themselves as

¹³ Mbh., I, 126, 30-32.

¹⁴ Mbh., II, 21, 2.

¹⁵ Mbh., IX, 32, 61-62; 33, 11-15 (Bom. Ed.)

¹⁶ Mbh., XII, 96, 7 ff.; also Manu, VII, 81-97.

¹⁷ Mbh., VI, 107, 73-79.

refugees, whose hair are dishevelled, whose vehicles have been destroyed, such enemies should not be killed, because according to *dharma* such killing is not praiseworthy in this world.”¹⁸

Before the Mahābhārata war started, both the parties made certain rules as regards the procedure of fighting which are more or less in line with the rules described above.¹⁹ (i) The enmity between the two parties should last only till the battle is being fought,—after that both the parties should be friends. (ii) One should fight with a person of equal strength, so that there might be no injustice such as is involved in fighting with a person of inferior strength. (iii) Words must be responded with words only. (iv) Anyone going out of his party's army should not be attacked. (v) A charioteer should fight with a charioteer, an elephant rider with an elephant rider, a cavalier with a cavalier and a soldier with his equal opponent. (vi) One should attack a person only after carefully examining his strength and fitness to fight, after duly warning him by shouting at him. No attack should be made on a person who is trusting and does not suspect an attack, or is tired. (vii) A person who is already engaged in fighting, one who has already surrendered himself, one who is running away, and one who is bereft of weapons and armours should not be attacked. (viii) Charioteers, bugle-blowers and weapon-bearers should not be attacked.

These were all points of honour to be observed. As Bhīṣma declares, “This is the eternal *dharma*. The self-born Manu has declared that whenever an opportunity of fighting with good people arises, a person should answer it according to *dharma* and should not destroy *dharma* by fighting in an unjust manner. He, who wins victory according to *dharma*, destroys his own self. A *ksatriya* with a *dhārmika* mentality, should conquer even a bad person, following the traditions of *dharmayuddha*. It is better to die fighting according to *dharma* than to obtain a victory by *adharma*.”²⁰

And only a person who followed these war rules and regulations was a real *ksatriya*.²¹ If a *ksatriya* died while fighting according to

¹⁸ Mbh., X, 5, 11-12 (Bom. Ed.), also cf. Mbh., VIII, 90, 111-114 (Bom. Ed.) Mbh., III, 18, 12-14.

¹⁹ Mbh., VI, 1, 1 ff.

²⁰ Mbh., XII, 96, 13-16.

²¹ Mbh., XII, 97, 7.

dharma, he attained heaven. Indra describes the various heavens attained by a warrior who fought religiously,²² and in the next chapter it is said that a retreat from the battlefield leads to hell.²³ This high standard of war-ethics was followed here and there in the Epics. Yudhiṣṭhira releases *gandharva* Citraratha saying: "Who would kill an enemy who is defeated in a battle, who has lost his fame, who is protected by his wives and who has lost all strength?"²⁴ It is according to the above described war-ethics that Pradyumna,—Kṛṣṇa's son—rebukes his charioteer saying: "O son of Dārūka never turn my chariot back from the battlefield, till I am alive."²⁵ It is according to this war-ethics that Vyāsa consoles Yudhiṣṭhira on the death of his young and brave nephew Abhimanyu saying: "Your brother's son Abhimanyu was brave and satisfied and is killed after killing many enemies on the battle-front. So that son of yours will attain that place in heaven which is obtained by people possessing the virtue of celibacy, intellect, knowledge and sacrifice."²⁶

There was also a pre-war etiquette, mostly to be observed by the kings who declared war. It was customary to send messengers of high intellectual capacity and impressing personality to attempt to bring about a compromise on the point of issue or issues that would start war. Yudhiṣṭhira sends no less a person than Lord Kṛṣṇa himself to avoid the great war. Rāma also sends *Āṅgada* to carry his war message to Rāvaṇa. Of course this was done on the eve of war and almost always the attempt failed as in the cases mentioned above. But this custom gave a fair chance to the defending party, to prepare and decide whether a war should be undertaken or not. This messenger was always considered sacrosanct and was not to be killed on any account. Rāvaṇa's ministers protested when he tried to kill *Āṅgada* and Duryodhana's attempts to imprison Kṛṣṇa are also condemned. These two instances however depict that the rule was not always followed.²⁷

Similarly a war was fought only after the due permission and

²² Mbh., XII, 99; cf. XI, 26, 12-17 (Bom. Ed.); XII, 92, 23-31; 98, 11-13.

²³ Mbh., XII, 100, 4-8 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁴ Mbh., I, 170, 36.

²⁵ Mbh., III, 18, 11.

²⁶ Mbh., VII, 71, 12-13.

²⁷ Rāmāyaṇa, Sundarakāṇḍa 52, 13-15; Yuddhakāṇḍa, 25, 20; 21, 18; Mbh., V, 128, 18-22.

blessings of the elder relatives even when they belonged to the opposite camp as in the case of the Pāṇḍavas. Before the war started, Yudhiṣṭhira, the model of ideal behaviour went into the enemy camp leaving all his weapons and chariot, to ask the permission of his elders, viz., Bhīṣma and Droṇa to start the war. The same etiquette is followed by Arjuna at the time of Virāṭa battle.²⁸ This behaviour is a new innovation in the concept of *dharmayuddha* is indicated by the fact, that Yudhiṣṭhira's behaviour is to be explained away by Kṛṣṇa to the warriors on both the sides declaring: "The ancient *śāstras* declare, that a man who starts fighting without taking the consent of his elder people and preceptors and without paying his respects to them, is censured by good people, but if he fights after taking permission and paying proper homage to the elders, then he always wins; and I also believe in this rule."²⁹ The peculiar mode, in which Arjuna shoots the arrows at the Virāṭa battle, is understood by Bhīṣma and Droṇa only. Another point that corroborates the newness of this etiquette is, that Droṇa is so much pleased with Yudhiṣṭhira that he blesses him for victory.³⁰ In normal course he would not have done so.

As contrasted with the war-ethics given in the Epics, the battle at Kurukṣetra presents rather a crude picture of the war practices. Instead of following the strict code of war-ethics, warriors on both the sides, behave in contrary manners. And everywhere though a protest is made against this ungainly behaviour, it is indulged so often that it can hardly be considered as an exception. The first incident of the breach of war-ethics (*dharmayuddha*) takes place when Arjuna kills Bhīṣma from behind Śikhandin, who was a woman but was transformed into a man.³¹

The rule of warfare is broken by fighting behind the back. It is strange, that Bhīṣma himself reveals the secret of his vulnerability to his enemy and invites death; himself sticking to war-ethics.

In spite of the rule that only equals should fight each other, Abhimanyu, who was only sixteen years of age and inexperienced in the art of warfare, was attacked and killed by six seasoned warriors like Karna, Droṇa etc. Abhimanyu was again bereft of

²⁸ Mbh., IV, 53, 6-7 (Bom. Ed.); IV, 48, ft. note 871 (Critical Edition).

²⁹ Mbh., VI, 43, 21-24.

³⁰ Mbh., VI, 43, 54.

³¹ Mbh., VI, 103, 70-82.

his chariot and armour, and he was simultaneously attacked by six warriors, who were fully equipped.³² This slaughter of Abhimanyu was preplanned and was done to break the morale of Arjuna. Arjuna was purposely drawn away and was kept engaged on the other front and Abhimanyu was surrounded by Kaurava warriors, separating him completely from Pāṇḍavas following him.

On hearing the news of the death of Abhimanyu, Arjuna took a vow to kill Jayadratha the next day before sunset and avenge his son's death. Failing which, he pledged his own death by immolation. Care was taken to hide Jayadratha behind the whole of the Kaurava army to save him, as well as to see Arjuna dead. This vow of Arjuna was difficult to be fulfilled within a day, so ever crafty Kṛṣṇa saved Arjuna from an ignominious end by cleverly hiding the sun from everybody's view. Thinking that the sun had set, Jayadratha came out along with other Kaurava warriors to see Arjuna immolating himself in fulfilment of his vow. The sun shone brightly and at Kṛṣṇa's hint Arjuna killed Jayadratha.

In an encounter between Bhūriśravā and Sātyaki, when the former was going to kill the latter, Arjuna on Kṛṣṇa's advice came from behind and cut off Bhūriśravā's hand. Bhūriśravā of course censures Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa for this unchivalrous behaviour, but Arjuna defends his act by saying, that it was his duty to save tired Sātyaki, who was his friend. Later, this king Bhūriśravā, whose arm was cut off, decided to meet his death by observing fast until death on the battlefield. But there, Yādava Sātyaki cut off his head and killed a person, who had already renounced his life. This act of Sātyaki was censured not only by his enemies, but also by his own party. Sātyaki defends himself saying, that he had done nothing wrong in killing an enemy because fate had ordained him to do so. Sātyaki in defence of his action retorted the Kauravas : "Where was that *dharma* of yours when you all together killed Subhadrā's son—young Abhimanyu—who was all alone? It is my vow to kill an enemy who throws me down into the battlefield and kicks me. I was already trying to kill him and I have acted properly in killing him. . ." He also quotes Vālmiki who had said, "All industrious people behave in a manner that would cause pain to his enemy."³³

³² Cf. Mbh., VII, 48 ff. For details about the battle.

³³ Mbh., VII, 143, 60-68 (Bom. Ed.)

Droṇa is also killed by breaking his morale, by announcing falsely that Aśvatthāmā—his son—was killed, while in fact an elephant of the same name was killed. Droṇa was shocked at the death of his son and tried to verify it by approaching Yudhiṣṭhira, reputed for speaking truth and nothing but the truth. Yudhiṣṭhira on the advice of Kṛṣṇa confirmed the news, muttering inaudibly, "either the elephant or the man." Thereupon Droṇa laid down his arms and sat motionless in his chariot, stricken with grief. Seizing this opportunity Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna, son of the King of Pāṇcāla cut off his head.³⁴

When Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna ran to kill Droṇa, Arjuna tried to prevent him from committing this brutal murder but Bhīma congratulated him and the Pāṇḍava army was rejoiced at this hard won victory.

It can be seen that Droṇa's morale is broken fraudulently; he is killed when he had already laid down his arms, and the fact that he is a brahmin and a preceptor of the Pāṇḍavas is ignored. Rules of war morality are thus broken with uniformity. That this is wrong, is recognised by the Pāṇḍavas themselves, first in qualms that Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira feel in perpetrating this fraud and then again when Arjuna censures his own side for killing the preceptor wrongfully.³⁵ The stand of the violators of the ethics on the other hand was, that Droṇa as a brahmin was following the *dharma* of a *ksatriya* and the violation of *varṇadharma*, justified the act of Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna.³⁶ The episode clearly indicates that ethics and polity were at variance and that influenced the ethical code.

The next war commandant of the Kaurava army Karna—was also killed by Arjuna when Karna was busy repairing the wheel of his chariot. He requested Arjuna to wait for some time so that he could finish his repairing job, reminding him of the precepts of war morality, but Kṛṣṇa retortingly reminded him of all the *adharma* that Kauravas had practised and advised Arjuna to seize the opportunity.

Arjuna's act is justified by the Epic writer—so that Arjuna's glory may not be outshone by his rival—by fabricating a story that Karna was cursed by his preceptor that at the time of his death the wheel of his chariot would sink in the earth and all his know-

³⁴ Mbh., VIII, 190-192 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁵ Mbh., VII, 196; 198 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁶ Mbh., VII, 197 (Bom. Ed.)

ledge would be forgotten at the time of real encounter.³⁷

The last blow to the Kaurava army was struck by Bhīmasena, who killed Duryodhana by breaking his thigh in a mace-fight. This act was also against the war morality and Balarāma, who was a witness to this fight was much enraged at this atrocity on the part of Bhīmasena. The action of Bhīmasena is justified on the ground, that he has taken a vow to break the thigh of his enemy as a vendetta, for insulting Draupadī and hence, there was nothing wrong about his action. Kṛṣṇa himself, who suggests Bhīma to behave in that fashion admits, that if Bhīma does not resort to some kind of trick, he will not be able to kill his arch enemy Duryodhana. He tries to pacify Balarāma also, on the ground of their blood relationship with Pāṇḍavas.³⁸ Bhīma's barbaric act of drinking Duhśāsana's blood is also defended on the grounds of vendetta.³⁹

Apart from the actual conduct of the warriors of the Mahābhārata war, we see fraud being resorted to elsewhere also, for the ultimate victory. Thus in the duel that ensues between Bhīmasena and Jarāsandha, Kṛṣṇa indirectly suggested to Bhīma to hit Jarāsandha, who was too much tired after continuous fighting of thirteen days.⁴⁰

Rāma the model hero, also killed Vāli, Sugrīva's brother, in an underhand manner.⁴¹ Rāma sent Sugrīva to fight a duel with Vāli, who was of superior strength, with previous understanding that when the fight became fierce and Sugrīva started losing, he would shoot an arrow from behind a tree at Vāli. Sugrīva went accordingly to fight, but Rāma could do nothing because both brothers looked so much alike, that he could not distinguish one from the other. Sugrīva came back defeated. In the next round, Rāma put a garland of forest flowers round Sugrīva's neck to recognise him; and when he found that Sugrīva was losing, he shot Vāli from behind. Vāli accuses Rāma for killing him, in this unrighteous manner on two grounds. Firstly, he was killed

³⁷ Mbh., IX, 90, 103-4.

³⁸ Mbh., IX, 58, 3-20; 60, 24-25 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁹ Mbh., VIII, 83, 30-31 (Bom. Ed.) It seems, drinking the blood of an enemy was a savage way of satisfying one's vengeance because Śūparṇakhā also declares that she wants to drink the blood of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to wreak her revenge. (Rāmāyaṇa, Aranyakāṇḍa, 19, 19).

⁴⁰ Mbh., II, 23, 31-33.

⁴¹ Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, 17 ff.

secretly ; and secondly, Rāma had declared no enmity with Vāli. Vāli also added that he was no beast of prey and neither his skin nor his teeth, were useful to induce Rāma to kill him for that purpose.⁴² Rāma's defence against these accusations is far from convincing. According to him, Vāli had committed a sin in keeping his younger brother's wife for his enjoyment, while the latter was still alive, and Rāma as the king of the country was entitled to punish this breach of *dharma*. In fact however, Rāma was not a king of Vāli's territory. Recognising the weakness of his own argument, he puts forth still weaker argument, namely, Vāli was a *vānara* and hence as good as forest beast, and hence Rāma was entitled to hunt him. It is obvious that what Rāma had done, was for purely political reasons of seeking a powerful alliance of Sugrīva and his army. He helped Sugrīva in getting the kingdom of Vāli and enlisted Sugrīva's help in his search for Sītā, his missing wife. The Mahābhārata also records that Rāma's act of killing Vāli was a blemish on his career. Lamenting Drona's death Arjuna says, "Just as Rāma's ill fame spread over the world by the wrongful killing of Vāli. So would yours, by the unjust slaughter of Drona—the preceptor."⁴³

All these instances from the Epics clearly point out that the code of war-ethics was shelved quickly and with ease, as matter of expediency. The wrongness about this breach of the code was felt and apart from the attempts that were made to justify the breaches, there is an open admission that such craftiness behoved the Yādavas and not the Pāṇḍavas. Bhūriśravā declares: "O Pārtha, kings of the Yādava and Andhaka family are always without manners and cruel. How is it that you follow their advice?"⁴⁴ This opinion about Kṛṣṇa and his tribe is supported elsewhere also when Śiśupāla censures the action of killing Jarāsandha.⁴⁵ The later identification of Kṛṣṇa with Viṣṇu, justifies all his craftiness as done for the welfare of the world. But in the days when his claim to godhood was not recognised, these acts were rightly denounced. Further, the weakness of justifying the acts of the Pāṇḍavas and their allies is obvious to the readers of the Epics, as well as to the

⁴² Rāmāyaṇa, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, 17 ff.

⁴³ Mbh., VII, 196, 35 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁴ Mbh., VII, 143, 13-15 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁵ Mbh., II, 39, 1-5; 38, 5, ff.

characters of the Epics. And so at times, in desperation, a stand is taken on Śukra's opinion that war knows no ethics. According to this code of law, "The enemy's army even though tired, wounded, or going somewhere or taking rest, should be attacked at once. Moreover, even when the enemies are asleep at midnight; when their commander-in-chief is killed, and when they are themselves divided in two parts, they should at once be destroyed."⁴⁶

In sharp contrast to this justification, we find in the author of the Epic, a sense of guilt, as revealed in a statement by Sātyaki, "Both, the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, have behaved sinfully during this war. All these brave people, though conversant with *dharma*, committed such actions to gain victory. I believe it is difficult to decide what is *dharma* and what is *adharma*."⁴⁷

Another illustration is that of the *rājadharma* or duties of a king, which forms one of the parts of Śāntiparva. We have already noted, how a king was supposed to develop a character full of ethical virtues because he was a king and his example would be followed by others. But apart from this individual ethical development, ethics was emphasised in administration of the state also. The king had a power to punish, but the punishment was to be imposed justly, otherwise the punishment (*daṇḍa*) would destroy the king and his own family.⁴⁸ Thus ideal king Sagara punished his own son Asamañjas for misbehaving.⁴⁹ The king could tax his subjects, but that was only in return for the service of protection he offered to them.⁵⁰ If he failed in doing so, he had no right to collect money from them. Thus the two main privileges of the king, viz. the right of punishment and the right of taxation, were put upon a sound ethical basis. In spite of this, we also read in the Epics that there is no difference between a king and a robber, looting, and murdering and fighting to achieve his own purpose. Arrogant kings like Sahastrārjuna, who in their selfish greed did not restrain from snatching away the articles of their poor subjects and even kill people for that purpose, serve as illustrations of this

⁴⁶ Mbh., X, 1, 55-56 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁷ Mbh., VII, 192, 40 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁸ Mbh., XII, 57, 42; 44, 45, 91, 32; I, 148, 10; 122, 59; 52, 7-10; XII, 86, 16-17; 115, 22; Rāmāyaṇa Uttarakāṇḍa, 79, 8-10.

⁴⁹ Mbh., III, 107.

⁵⁰ Mbh., II, 18, 24; 5, 71; IV, 18, 24; XII, 98, 1, 49, 22; 77, 18; 69, 25, 75, 10; XIII, 61, 29 (Bom. Ed.)

dictum. Rules of *nīti* (political wisdom) have here influenced the ethical basis of *rājadharmā*.

The influence of *nīti* on the ethical concepts is also evident. It is proposed to examine the two main ethical concepts of truth and *ahimsā* as discussed by the Epics, as illustrations.

Satya : The ethical concept of truth was highly valued in India, from the vedic times.⁵¹ The Epics not only maintain the tradition but exalt truth to the highest position and declare: "There is nothing higher than truth, truth is everything, in truth lies immortality, so, follow the path of truth."⁵² Apart from the limited connotation of truth as true speech, the Epic introduces us with a wider meaning of it. Bhṛgu explains truth as follows: "*Satya* is the *veda* and *tapas* is also equal to *satya*. It is by *satya* that people are protected and it is *satya* that leads to heaven. Behaviour that goes against the *vedas* is called '*asatya*'. It is another form of darkness and a person who follows it goes to hell. Just as truth is identified with *dharma*; *dharma* with light, light with happiness; so is falsehood identified with *adharma*, *adharma* with darkness and darkness with misery."⁵³ Thus a person whose behaviour is perfect according to the norms laid down in the *vedas* is a truthful person as denoted by the term '*satyavrata*' used in the Epic.⁵⁴ In a discourse between Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma, Yudhiṣṭhira asks, "O Grandfather, . . . What are the characteristics of truth, how can it be obtained? and what merit do you acquire by practising it?" Bhīṣma said, "O king of the Bharata family! If *satya* is destroyed a mixture of *varṇa* ensues forth, which is not good for the society. . . Truth is the only way, only, religion, only penance, only asceticism. Truth is *brahman*, truth is sacrifice and everything depends upon truth." After thus eulogising the quality of truth, he further proceeds to describe the various types of qualities that go to constitute *satyadharmā*. "O king, there are thirteen types of truth. These are truth, impartiality (*samatā*), control of senses (*dama*), lack of envy (*anasūyatā*), forgiveness (*ksamā*), modesty (*lajjā*),

⁵¹ Rgveda, VII, 104, 12, Śatapatha brāhmaṇa, S.B.E. Vol. 44, p. 85. Taittiriya Upaniṣad, 15, 1.

⁵² Mbh., XII, 251, 10; 169, 26-27; 156, 4-6; Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 14, 3-7.

⁵³ Mbh., XII, 183, 105.

⁵⁴ Mbh., XIII, 157, 11 (Bom. Ed.); XII, 169, 27.

endurance (*tīkṣā*) absence of jealousy (*amātsarya*), spirit of sacrifice (*tyāga*), nobility (*āryatva*), patience (*dhṛti*) mercy (*dayā*) and non-violence (*ahimsā*). Then he defines the characteristics of all these qualities, which are purely ethical in nature, and declares that if any of these is developed, it enhances one's power to remain attached to truth. Thus Bhiṣma considers this all round ethical development of an individual's character as nothing but a form of right or truthful behaviour. And this *satyadharma* is declared by him as "yielding more merit than any type of other sacrificial activity, even a thousand *aśvamedha*."⁵⁵ Elsewhere this is emphasised: "If truth and a thousand *aśvamedha* sacrifices are balanced the former would excel the latter. O king, the study of *vedas* together with a bath in all the sacred places of pilgrimage would not surpass true speech. There is no religion higher than truth, there is no principle better than truth; neither is there any sin greater than falsehood. *Satya* is *Brahman*; it is the universal law."⁵⁶

In the Epics there is a mixture of pure ethics with popular religion to make the doctrine of *satya* palatable to the general public. Truth and falsehood are placed in the category of *punya* (good action) and *pāpa* (sin) leading to heaven or hell. Thus a person giving false evidence is threatened with hell not only for himself, but for his ancestors also.⁵⁷ A truth loving person on the other hand is not only declared as attaining heaven but also mysterious powers by the merit won by him.⁵⁸ Kṛṣṇa revives the still born child of Abhimanyu by the power of his truthful character (*satyavrata*).⁵⁹ Yudhiṣṭhira's chariot did not touch ground as a result of the merit achieved by his truthfulness.⁶⁰

The concept of truth is made more practical when it is declared, "Only that is truth which is beneficial to all creatures."⁶¹ Bhiṣma declares: "Whenever a lie becomes benedictory for people or helps to stop violence, one may even tell a lie, similarly when truth leads to violence or any such evil consequence one should avoid

⁵⁵ Mbh., XII, 166, 6.

⁵⁶ Mbh., I, 69, 21-25; III, 43, 42-49; XII, 22, 14; 75, 28-32 (Bom. Ed.)

⁵⁷ Mbh., V, 30, 34; I, 7, 1-3. cf. Manu, II, 69; XIII, 75, 32 (Bom. Ed.)

⁵⁸ Mbh., III, 36, 34.

⁵⁹ Mbh., XIV, 69, 17-22 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶⁰ Mbh., VII, 190, 56 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶¹ Mbh., III, 200, 4.

truth."⁶² In this Bhīṣma emphasises the philosophy of the result of the action as more important than the action itself. Elsewhere in the Epic Kṛṣṇa also enunciates the same formula about the ideal of truth. According to him, "... At the time of marriage, in sexual intercourse (*maithuna*), when somebody's life is in danger and when somebody's wealth is being stolen—telling a lie is not a sin. A lie is also allowed when one's own wealth is robbed. . . A person who does not know this and sticks to truth on all occasions, obtains *dharma* as a result. It is with the ultimate effect in view that truth and falsehood are to be evaluated. Only a discrimination between truth and falsehood makes a person conversant with *dharma*."⁶³ This is the practical reorientation of the ethical concept of truth. Kṛṣṇa narrates two stories to explain the principle. The first, deals with the hunter Bālāka, who followed unknowingly a blind beast, which was the cause of unlimited ravages and killed it. He was, therefore, bodily taken to heaven as a great benefactor of the people. As against this, the second deals with the religious brahmin Kauśika by name who, because of his passion for truth, revealed to the robbers, where the travellers were hiding and thus got them killed at the hands of the robbers near his *āśrama*.

Bālāka, when he killed that blind animal, had no intention to free the earth of the danger, nor did the brahmin Kauśika wanted the travellers to be killed. Motive thus did not matter. It is the result, which decides whether the act should be regarded as a virtue or a sin.

This practical evaluation of truth deteriorates the high ideal that truth is, and makes it purely mercenary. Truth was to be spoken, only when it was advantageous either to one's own self or to others, not otherwise. Especially, at a time of crisis, when a man's integrity is tested, the Epic allowed liberty to tell falsehood or a white lie.

However, the good intention of telling a white lie for the benefit of others, slowly degenerated into selfishness. Kṛṣṇa for instance, advised Yudhiṣṭhira saying, "If Droṇa fights even for half a day more, then your whole army would be destroyed. So, on this occasion you tell a little lie and protect us. At certain times,

⁶² Mbh., XII, 110 ff.

⁶³ Mbh., VIII, 69 (Bom. Ed.)

untruth is better than truth and the man, who tells a lie, does not incur a sin."⁶⁴

The whole Mahābhārata war reflects, how this perverted ideal of truth dominated Kṛṣṇa's policy to win the great war. Everything is fair in love and war, seems to be the practical ethics. But even outside war, truth is diluted by compensation in the form of *prāyaścittas*. Bhīma advises Yudhiṣṭhira, first to break his promise of staying for fourteen years in the forest and then to expiate it by sacrifice and gifts, after regaining the kingdom. The *prāyaścitta* for telling a lie that he suggests is absolutely nominal. "O king, you will be free from the sin of telling a lie if you will offer grass to a poor ox, who draws much burden, till he is satisfied."⁶⁵

The above review of the concept of truth reveals that, though held as the highest ethical ideal for an individual and euologised as the foundation of *dharma*, it remained more or less an ideal.

The characters of the Epics—Yudhiṣṭhira and Rāma—created as embodiment of this ideal, show an unforgivable weakness when crisis arises and do not refrain from telling white lies. The prevailing tone of the Epic is to cheapen the ideal, by giving it a practical turn. The ideal is further conventionalised as a pattern of good action fetching merit. Only once it is mentioned that the ideal of truth should be upheld for satisfying one's own conscience.

Let us now examine the another equally important ethical concept viz. *ahimsā* or non-violence.

Ahimsā : The doctrine of *ahimsā* is comparatively a late development especially in its aspect of compassion towards animals and birds. The vedic as well as the early Epic period both reflect a society wherein this aspect of *ahimsā* is completely absent, the society as well as religion both demanding slaughter of animals for different purposes. Kane⁶⁶ traces the origin of the ethical concepts of pity (*dayā*) and *ahimsā* to the philosophical doctrine of the *Ātman* which is immanent in every individual : 'that art thou' (*tat tvam asi*). Though this trend originated during the upanishadic

⁶⁴ Mbh., VII, 190, 46-47 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶⁵ Mbh., III, 35, 34.

⁶⁶ P. V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstras, Vol. 11 Chap. 1 cf. Vedic Index, Vol. 1, p. 148 "*Ahimsā* as a developed and articulated doctrine, would seem to have arisen from the acceptance of the doctrine of transmigration, which in its fundamentals is later than the brahmanic period."

period it was emphasised by the buddhist and the jain philosophy of life. The sacrificial religion of the brhmanic society having been superseded by the upnisadic philosophy, the doctrine of *ahimsā* came to be easily integrated into the brahmanic ideal of ethics as one of the important moral qualities to be developed by an individual.

This trend was carried on further by the Epics and the *smṛtis* and very often *ahimsā* alone, is represented as the essence of *dharma* in the Epics.⁶⁷ Bhīṣma in *Anuśāsanaparva*⁶⁸ declares *ahimsā* to be four-fold. He declares: "A person should neither commit *himsā* mentally, vocally or by action; nor should he eat meat. We have heard that the learned have declared the mind, the speech, and actions as the sources of *himsā* and its defaults as established in meat eating. It followed then, that not only the physical aspect of *himsā* (violence) as reflected in the slaughter of animals, but also the more subtle aspects, such as determination to take revenge, or anger or verbal violence like cruel speech (*vakpārusyam*) are to be avoided in the practice of *ahimsā*. Hence qualities such as forbearance, sweet speech and quiet temperament along with compassion, that allayed physical violence; are emphasised as essential points of *sadācāra* or behaviour of good people.

Tulādhara, goes a step further by emphasising the positive aspect of *ahimsā*, which consisted in doing activities beneficial to other creatures and in having a friendly disposition towards everybody in all circumstances. This positive designation of *ahimsā*, denoted by the term '*abhaya*', is emphasised considerably, because it envisages a new relationship between a person and his surroundings. As a direct result of such behaviour, the creatures would respond to that person in the same manner and become friendly to him. "He fears nobody because he does not frighten anybody." This fearless state is the subtlest psychological benefit, that a person derives by the practice of *ahimsā*. A person following the path of *ahimsā*, achieves more religious merit than the performance of sacrifices, asceticism, giving gifts and such other behaviour called *dharma*. The greatness of this fearless state (*abhaya*), is further indicated by the results gained by other types of religious

⁶⁷ Mbh., I, 11, 13; XIII, 115, 25 (Cal. Ed.); III, 198, 19, 69; XIII, 116, 40; 114, 6 (Bom. Ed.)

⁶⁸ Mbh., XIII, 114, 4-9 (Bom. Ed.)

merits. A person who acquires religious merit by performing sacrifices attains heaven, etc., but so great is the merit acquired by '*abhaya*' that even gods are puzzled as to which region of heaven such a person should attain. An attempt to place ethical qualities higher than that of the physical forms of religious behaviour, not involving necessarily moral integrity, is quite significant here.⁶⁹

One point to be particularly noted is the comment made by Tulādhara about this *dharma*, being overshadowed by other *dharma*s preached in the *vedas*, and hence not being properly understood by many people. Does this indicate that the vedic sacrificial ritual, which involved the slaughter of animals had such a hold on the mind of the people, that they found it difficult to understand the new concept?

It is however admitted by the Epic, that it is almost impossible to follow this ideal to perfection. Sometimes, somewhere, one is bound to hurt somebody, or to kill small insects unseen by the naked eye. Dharmavyādha points out to the violence that is committed in the normal day to day living and declares: "*Ahimsā* has been accepted as a great ideal by people, but O best of the brahmins, is there anybody on this earth, who does not kill any creature? I think that there is no such person... The only difference to be found is that the ascetics due to their conscious attempts, commit less violence than the others."⁷⁰

The whole discourse of Dharmavyādha is in support of his own profession, which makes *himsā* incumbent upon him, although it involves violence. Yet, if observed from a practical point of view, it is more or less true.

The point, which Dharmavyādha intends to make out is, that though *ahimsā* is a great ideal, no one is able to realise it perfectly. Even Tulādhara, who declares *abhaya* to be the one and only *dharma* for perfect behaviour, admits its limit when he defines it as "maintaining one's self by hurting other creatures in the least possible manner."⁷¹

The Epic more than once defends violence for the sake of *svadharma*, Arjuna tries to convince Yudhiṣṭhira that the violence committed as *svadharma* in the Mahābhārata war was not a sin,

⁶⁹ Mbh., XII, 254, 5-36.

⁷⁰ Mbh., III, 199, 19 ff.

⁷¹ Mbh., XII, 245, 9.

because as he declares, "I do not see any being in this world, who is absolutely non-violent, all strong animals subsist on other animals. . . Nobody can live in this world without committing violence".⁷² Like Dharmavyādha, Arjuna seeks to convince Yudhiṣṭhira of *himsā*, generated by the performance his *svadharma* as a *ksatriya*, to punish evil and kill enemies. Thus, in the Epic, ideal of *svadharma* conflicts with the ideal of *ahimsā*.

Svadharma justified *himsā*; it was neither a sin nor a moral degradation but a duty and a privilege. The philosophy of Gītā which preaches Arjuna to kill his enemies and thus indulge in violence is also to be understood in this light. "When Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to fight, it does not follow that he is supporting the validity of warfare."⁷³ Elsewhere, Gītā also sets the ideal of *ahimsā* before us in its various descriptions of emancipated soul referred to elsewhere. Thus describing a *bhakta*, the Lord says, "Know him to be one, by whom no one is afraid, nor is he afraid of anybody."⁷⁴ In a state of perfect equilibrium as prescribed by Gītā it is impossible to nourish violence. This tendency of lowering the ideal to the level of practicability is all the more visible, when we consider the more physical aspect of violence in killing animals for the purpose of food and sacrifice. The custom of offering beef for dinner to a special guest such as a king or a son-in-law, or a *snātaka* is upheld in the Epics and *dharmaśāstras*. The Pāṇḍavas are non-vegetarians. They kill so many forest deer during their stay in a forest that they appear in Yudhiṣṭhira's dream and request him not to kill them any more.⁷⁵ Of course the whole incident is dropped in the critical edition and consequently it loses much of its force, yet it well reflects to what extent *ksatriyas* could indulge in the sports of hunting without qualms for the ideal of *ahimsā*. Bhīmsena was so fond of meat that special hunters were kept during the Mahābhārata war to provide him with extra supply of meat.⁷⁶ Not only the *ksatriyas* but even the brahmins partook of meat.

In the legend of king Kalmāṣapāda it is noted that the brahmin

⁷² Mbh., XII, 15, 20-28.

⁷³ S. Radhakrishnan, Bhagvadgītā, p. 68.

⁷⁴ Gītā, XII, 15.

⁷⁵ Mbh., III, 258 (Bom. Ed.)

⁷⁶ Mbh., IX, 30, 24 (Bom. Ed.)

who comes as a guest to his house asks particularly for meat as his food.⁷⁷ Bhīṣma himself on one occasion even while declaring himself in favour of vegetarianism, declares meat to be the best article for food. "There is no other food that is as tasty as meat especially there is nothing better than meat to rejuvenate the wounded, tired, pleasure-seeking and sick persons . . . Meat immediately increases strength, there is no better food than meat."⁷⁸

Meat was thus not only used freely as an article of food, but was also considered an article fit to be used as offering to gods and manes. The *śrāddha* offerings and dinner consisted of meat and the better the quality of meat the longer the period of satisfaction for the ancestors.⁷⁹ The Rāmāyaṇa refers to Sītā taking a vow to offer one hundred thousand cows, clothes and food to brahmins and thousand jars full of wine along with meat to the river Gaṅgā when she returned.⁸⁰

Dharmavyādha represents a rather unique philosophy in favour of meat eating. "O *dvija*, the animals whose meat I sell, acquire merit because they satisfy gods, guests, servants and manes by their meat. The vegetables, animals, deers and birds are created as food, so says the *śrūti*." King Śibi of great forbearance, went to heaven by offering his meat. In times before in the kitchen of king Rantideva 2,000 oxen along with other animals were killed and king Rantideva gave that meat, along with other food as a gift. He acquired much fame by that. In the sacrifice performed during the four months of the rainy season, animals were killed and those animals sanctified by religious *mantras* went to heaven. Again, it is told in the *śrūti*, that Agni desires meat, and so brahmins kill animals in the sacrifice. Animals thus killed go to heaven. Nobody would have eaten meat if Agni would not have desired meat. The sages have formulated the following law for meat eating. viz. "That person who eats meat always after offering it to gods and manes. . . is considered a vegetarian, just as a person who approaches his wife only at the

⁷⁷ Mbh., I, 176, 24-35. For other references of meat eating ref. Mbh., II, 50, 4; II, 4, 1-2, 49, 9; XIII, 115; 208, 11-12; 160, 9, (Bom. Ed.) Rāmāyaṇa I, XII (Griffith's trans.); Uttarakāṇḍa, 42, 18-19.

⁷⁸ Mbh., XIII, 116, 7-9 (Bom. Ed.)

⁷⁹ Mbh., XIII, 88 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁰ Rāmāyaṇa, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 52, 88, 89; 55, 20.

time of *ṛtu*, is considered a celibate. A person who is bent upon the path of truth and has renounced *karmas* should not eat meat.”⁸¹

As against this the diadactic portions of the Epics contain some passages that record sentiments against eating meat, some forbidding it completely, while others partially. Thus, describing the ways of behaviour (*sadācāra*) the Śāntiparva declares, “A person who has left meat eating should neither eat the meat sanctified by the *adhvaryu*, who knows Yajurveda, nor the meat that is not sanctified. Moreover, he should not eat meat which is the remnant of a *śrāddhakriyā*.”⁸² The Anuśāsanaparva⁸³ records a long discourse on the *ahiṃsā dharma* concentrating specially on meat eating. The long passage which is clearly against meat eating, is however not quite certain whether a person should completely refrain from it; and though in various places it admits and grants higher religious merit to a person who completely gives up meat, it also grants permission to partake of it, if properly sanctified by the vedic recitation and eaten as a remnant of either a sacrificial or a *śrāddha* ritual.

The usual philosophy against meat eating is: “That a person, who eats the flesh of an animal desirous of life, is himself eaten by the animal whom he had eaten. O Bhārata, the dying animal says, ‘If I am eaten (*mām*) I will eat him (*sah*)’ and that is why meat is so called (*maṃsa*) . . . The man who eats the meat of an animal, killed or dead, is as good as a killer.”⁸⁴ The person who buys meat with money, the person who eats meat and the person who killed an animal for the sake of meat are all killers. Even a person who does not partake of meat himself but supports meat eating incurs the blemish and so does a person who supports the slaughter of animals. While a person who does not eat meat and takes compassion on all the animals is not avenged by them and acquires a long life and perfect health.⁸⁵ Revealing the merit of completely abandoning meat as food, it states: “We have heard that the merit acquired by completely abandoning meat as a food surpasses the merit acquired by offering gifts of either gold,

⁸¹ Mbh., III, 208, 4-16.

⁸² Mbh., XII, 186, 13.

⁸³ Mbh., XIII, 114, 115 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁴ Mbh., XIII, 116, 33-35 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁵ Mbh., XIII, 115, 39-42 (Bom. Ed.)

cows or land.⁸⁶ To illustrate this statement, is quoted the example of the king Vasu, who had to fall twice from heaven and reside in the nether-world, because he expressed an opinion in favour of meat eating.⁸⁷ Yet in the very next chapter it is declared that, "A person does not incur any blemish if he eats meat sanctified by ceremonies as told in the *vedas*, because all the animals have been created for the sacrifice according to the *vedas*."⁸⁸

The hesitant attitude of the Epics towards meat eating can be understood, if we keep in mind the fact that the religious practices of sacrifice as well the *śrāddha* ritual had to be reconciled with the ideal of non-violence. A compromise is struck by saying, that violence committed for religious purpose was no violence at all. And meat eating as an offering for religious purpose was not sinful. It further created new religious trends like advocacy of abstinence from meat on particular days.⁸⁹ Meat of certain animals was prohibited for the purpose of eating because they were considered inauspicious, as against the meat of others, specially recommended for *śrāddha*.⁹⁰ Meat was strictly prohibited for a *brahmacārī* and a *vānaprastha*.⁹¹ Thus the Epic presents a period of transition.

The Epic also recommends a new kind of *yajna* where offerings consist of vegetables and grains or curds, milk and ghee. A brahmin performed a sacrifice in which he offered only vegetables. On seeing the brahmin performing such a sacrifice another brahmin called Parṇāda by name took the form of a deer and went to him saying, "You have started this *karma* devoid of ritual and sacred recital, so the whole sacrifice would but fetch sin to you. So, O brahmin, offer me in your sacrifice and make it perfect and attain heaven." On hearing the deer, goddess Sāvitrī also came there and told the brahmin, "O brahmin, sacrifice this animal in the fire and offer it to me." But the brahmin declared that he would not kill the deer. The deer requested again but the brahmin would not yield. Again the deer came back and started saying, "O Satya, please kill me. If I am slaughtered as an offering in the

⁸⁶ Mbh., XIII, 115, 43 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁷ Mbh., XIII, 115, 57-58 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁸ Mbh., XIII, 116, 14 (Bom. Ed.)

⁸⁹ Mbh., III, 193, 28.

⁹⁰ Mbh., XII, 36, 20 ff.; XIII, 104, 94, 41, 21 (Bom. Ed.)

⁹¹ Mbh., XIII, 22, 17 (Cal. Ed.)

sacrifice, I shall attain heaven. . . I give you a divine sight whereby you will be able to behold the *apsarās* and *gandharvas* yourself." That brahmin saw these heavenly objects and thought that, "I will attain heaven by killing animals in the sacrifice." But by so doing, he destroyed all his religious merit. So violence is not benefactor for the sacrifice. Then god Dharma, who had appeared as a deer to test the brahmin, appeared before that brahmin incarnate and made him to perform a sacrifice that was non-violent. "So O Yudhiṣṭhira, I tell you the truth that the path of non-violence yields to an eternal bliss, while that of violence leads to temporary bliss like heaven etc.; and hence is not considered proper for the truly learned."⁹²

The fact that the whole story is recast in favour of *ahimsā* shows clearly that the non-violent sacrificial ritual was being evolved to reconcile the old sacrificial ritual with the ethical concept of *ahimsā*.

In a story,⁹³ Mahābhārata clearly records the conflict, that arose between the traditional ritualism and the new concept of a sacrifice, where non-violence was strictly observed, finally showing the triumph of the later ideal over the older. The story reads : In ancient times, Indra started a sacrifice and great sages were witnessing it. On seeing the animals, brought to the altar, they took pity and advised Indra to offer old seeds because they said slaughter of animals in a sacrifice can never be termed *dharma*. Indra however did not consent to this view and a great controversy arose as to what should be offered in the sacrifice; animate beings or inanimate objects. After a prolonged discussion on this topic they approached king Vasu and asked his opinion in the matter. King Vasu, without considering the strength of the ascetics, declared, that one can use any available thing for the sacrificial offering. As he gave a false judgment, he was thrown into the nether-worlds.

The tussle between the sages and Indra, is however finally decided in favour of the sages in another story that follows. The sage Agastya performed a sacrifice lasting for twelve years in which nothing but old seeds were offered. Indra offended by this, did not send rain for twelve years. So the sages were confused, as to how the sacrifice, in which only food was offered as gift would last

⁹² Mbh., XII, 264.

⁹³ Mbh., XIII, 91 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

for twelve years if it did not rain. Agastya declared that he had decided to perform his sacrifice with seeds and he would do it by mentally offering the seeds, when the grains were not available. He also declared that the merit acquired by asceticism was so great that he could summon all the grains available in the world and could himself become Indra and protect the world. But the assembled sages advised him not to waste his merit and asked him to continue his non-violent sacrifice. Indra afraid of the ascetic merit of Agastya, sent rain and pleased the sage.

The final deprecation of sacrifice is found, when Yudhiṣṭhira's great *āsvamedha* sacrifice is run down by a mangoose.⁹⁴ When the great *āsvamedha* sacrifice was completed, a green eyed mangoose who was golden on one side, declared from his hole, "O kings, this sacrifice is not equivalent to the merit acquired by the gift of one pound of porridge given by a brahmin of Kurukṣetra." Being surprised at this speech, everybody asked him why he censured the great sacrifice, which had satisfied everybody. The mangoose then, narrated the story of a brahmin, who stayed with his wife, son and daughter-in-law in Kurukṣetra and subsisted upon picking up grains from the field and eating them once, when the sixth part of the day remained. Once, in a famine, when it was difficult to obtain grains and the whole family had already missed one meal, the brahmin managed to get a pound of barley with great difficulty. They prepared porridge with this and offered it to gods and then divided it into four equal parts. At the very moment a brahmin guest came to their place. After due introduction the brahmin offered his part to the guest, but it did not satisfy the guest's hunger. The other members of the family then, in turn offered their shares, with much pleasure. The brahmin guest, who was Dharma himself, thereupon bestowed the boon of attaining heaven upon the brahmin family. The mangoose, was transformed into gold only on one side when he smelled that porridge; he visited many other big sacrifices, including this *āsvamedha*, to transform the remaining half into gold but he did not succeed. So saying, the mangoose disappeared.

This new concept of *ahimsā* also affected the administration of justice. Capital punishment is disfavoured according to this

⁹⁴ Mbh., XIV, 90 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

ideal. The Śāntiparva narrates a dialogue between a father and a son wherein this problem of introducing non-violence in justice and abolition of capital punishment is discussed. In reply to a doubt expressed by King Yudhiṣṭhira as to how a king would be able to protect his subjects, if he does not punish anybody, Bhiṣma narrates the following discussion between Dyumatsena and Satyavāna. The latter on seeing some convicts being conducted to the gallows on command of his father, said: "If to kill anybody would be considered a *dharma* then *dharma* would be *adharma* and vice versa. So it is not *dharma* to declare death punishment." His father tried to convince him that punishment to culprits was the only proper way to give justice as there would otherwise be anarchy. But Satyavāna opposes the death punishment and suggests three alternatives. Firstly, the culprit should, as far as possible, be forgiven on confession that he would not commit any further crimes; secondly, he must be handed over to a brahmin for improving his behaviour and if he does not obey the commands of that brahmin then he may be punished with imprisonment, etc. in accordance with the degree or nature of crime; and thirdly, if death punishment is inevitable, the convicts should be offered as offerings in a sacrifice so that they might attain heaven.⁹⁵ No conclusion is reached and the discourse ends with Dyumatsena's opinion that order should be established at any cost. The punishment should however, be in accordance with the age and ability of the culprit and circumstances in which he committed the offence. The king should further behave compassionately towards the culprits, in giving judgment. This new principle in the administration of justice advocating sympathy and consideration, in substitution of the old code of 'eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth' is significant in the development of ethics.

The suggestion of offering convicts sentenced to death as offerings in a sacrifice leads us to the much controversial problem of the prevalence of human sacrifice. The Śāntiparva includes human beings in the list of sacrificial offerings⁹⁶ and this list is corroborated by a similar list in the Taittirīya saṁhitā⁹⁷ as referred to by Kane. Besides, the Epics contain legends regarding human sacrifice.

⁹⁵ Mbh., XII, 259 ff.

⁹⁶ Mbh., XII, 268, 22.

⁹⁷ P. V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstras, Vol. III, pp. 928-961.

The Rāmāyaṇa⁹⁸ narrates the famous legend of Śunahśepa dating back to R̥gvedā according to which, he is bought by a king to be offered in a sacrifice in place of the *āśvamedha* horse, stolen by Indra. The Mahābhārata⁹⁹ describes the sacrifice performed by a king Somaka, in which he offers his only son Jantu as offering in order to get a hundred sons, according to the advice of his *purohita*. Jantu is offered as a *bali*, and as a result hundred sons are obtained by the king. But as a result of the act of killing a son, the king as well as the *purohita* are condemned to hell for expiation. After due expiation they attain heaven. Jarāsandha, the king of Magadha, also intended to perform a human sacrifice.¹⁰⁰

The human sacrifice, must have been performed at some remote period but in the Epic times, an unfavourable public opinion towards this practice was unmistakably shown.

The wider connotation of the word *ahimsā* included abstinence from *himsā* performed verbally as well as mentally. Accordingly anger, jealousy etc. were the mental manifestations of *himsā*, while harsh speech etc. were the verbal manifestations of *himsā*. We may now examine these concepts of *ahimsā* in greater details.

Anger : Anger is considered one of the inborn vices of human nature along with desire and greed, the conquest of which leads to control of the senses. Lord Kṣṇa in giving the description of a *sthita-prajña* describes the origin of vices from one another.¹⁰¹ Sanatsujāta in enumerating the elemental twelve vices in a person, places anger at the head of the list.¹⁰² *Kāma* and *krodha* are considered as the root of all evil desires and actions that follow them. In the Gītā, Arjuna asks the Lord, "Now impelled by what, does this man commit sin even involuntarily, as though driven by force. The Lord replies, "it is *kāma* and *krodha* begotten of the element of *rajas*. Insatiable and grossly wicked, know these to be the inborn enemies, of people.¹⁰³ In the narration of the *āsuri sampad* that leads to destruction, anger is included.¹⁰⁴ **Pride**

⁹⁸ Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 61, 8 ff.

⁹⁹ Mbh., III, 127.

¹⁰⁰ Mbh., II, 13, 14.

¹⁰¹ Gītā, II, 63.

¹⁰² Mbh., V, 43, 15.

¹⁰³ Gītā, III, 36-37.

¹⁰⁴ Gītā, IX, 12; XVI, 4.

and anger, declares the Śāntiparva are two great enemies of human beings.¹⁰⁵

A perfect development of individual's character could be achieved only by conquering all these overpowering vices. The perfect conquest would be achieved by a person, who would keep an undisturbed temperament and preserve calmness even if any untoward thing is done to him by somebody. Brahmā declares that person to be great, who does not harm anybody even though he himself is harmed.¹⁰⁶ Śukra advises his haughty daughter Devayāni to subdue her anger. "That human being, who bears ever with patience the taunting speech of others, has won everything. He who bridles his rising anger, like a steed, is called a leader by the good; not he who pulls at the horse's reins. He who drives forth his rising anger by absence from anger, O Devayāni has overcome this all. He who holds ill humour in check, he who calmly bears evil reports, and he when himself tormented, does not torment, such a one is indeed a vessel of profit. A person performs sacrifice every month for a hundred years, without being tired, and another person is not angered by anything. Of the two, the latter is greater."¹⁰⁷ Yayāti advised his son Yadu: "If somebody rebukes you, you, should not return his manner, but should pocket the insult because the anger of the short-tempered person burns himself while the merit goes to one, who suffers silently." The definition of *sadācāra* also emphasises this point.¹⁰⁸ And the conquest of anger, is considered one of the requisite qualities of a forest dweller as well as a *sanyāsīn*. A brahmin was also supposed to have controlled his anger. Viśvāmitra, who by a severe penance tried to become a brahmin, lamented his short temper when due to anger, he cursed the *apsarā* Rambhā sent by Indra to guile him, and determines to conquer henceforward all his senses to be a brahmin.¹⁰⁹ The brahmin Kauśika also repents his rash action of burning a bird to ashes through his anger when the chaste woman teaches him that a brahmin to be a true brahmin should conquer anger.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Mbh., XII, 248, 13-20; also cf. XII, 360; III, 29.

¹⁰⁶ Mbh., XII, 288, 14-20.

¹⁰⁷ Mbh., I, 74, 147.

¹⁰⁸ Mbh., III, 198, 58 ff. 29, 35-45; XIV, 20, 341-345 (Bom. Ed.)

¹⁰⁹ Rāmāyaṇa Bālakāṇḍa, 64, 17 also cf., Sundarakāṇḍa, 55, 3-6.

¹¹⁰ Mbh., III, 197, 5-6; 31-42.

The Mahābhārata presents the ideal of Vasiṣṭha describing him thus, "That Vasiṣṭha, had conquered lust and anger by asceticism and had controlled his senses." That sage had controlled his anger so much that he did not destroy the family of Kauśika in spite of Viśvāmitra's bad behaviour towards him and in spite of his son's death at the hands of the former.¹¹¹ He rather desired to end his own life. He also obliged King Kalmāṣapāda who had eaten his hundred sons by bestowing a son upon him, and discouraged his grandson from taking revenge upon his enemies who had killed his father.¹¹²

In the Epic narrative, however both, brahmins and ascetics, are found to be the most short-tempered people. On finding the slightest breach in conduct or on infliction of a pettiest insult a person is cursed. As a matter of fact the story of the Mahābhārata starts from a curse inflicted upon king Parikṣita for disturbing a sage's penance. Similarly, Pāṇḍu gets cursed because he unknowingly killed a sage, who was enjoying the sexual act in the form of a deer. Cya-vana gets enraged at Sukanyā's playful activity, which blinded him and stops the excretory function of her father's army. The offence may not always be as serious as described above where losing a life or disabling a limb is concerned. Even a small impudence on the part of a king like Kalmāṣapāda who did not give way to sage Śakti because he was a brahmin and had a right over the road, invited a curse. So did King Lomapāda, who refused to give a brahmin something formerly offered to him. Because of this, it did not rain in his kingdom for twelve years and along with the king who had actually committed the offence all his subjects had to suffer. Sage Jaratkāru abandoned his wife at the slightest offence; her offence being, a reminder to perform his daily duties. So does Uttuṅka, who curses king Pauṣya for serving him with impure food with a hair inside it. The idiosyncracies of Durvāsā, whose marked characteristic was short temper and who specialised in cursing is too well known. As he himself puts it, "Who would welcome Durvāsā in one's house-hold as a guest? Because with the slightest of fault he grows angry. He is the most short-tempered person amongst all creatures. Who would be ready to accommodate me with this fame? Yet if there is any person

¹¹¹ Mbh., I, 164, 5.

¹¹² Mbh., I, 173 ff., also cf. Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa, 33.

who would do so he should be careful not to offend me".¹¹³

While denouncing anger so often and so sharply the Epics declare: "Wrath of a brahmin is like a fire, which burns not only the offender but also its family."¹¹⁴ "The poison in the form of a brahmin's wrath is even more deadly than that of a black serpent because there is no remedy for it."¹¹⁵ The Vanaparva of the Mahābhārata truly declares, "Great is the anger of the great souled ones, and great is also their favour. It was the wrath of a brahmin that made waters of the ocean salty, the fire in the form of the wrath of the sages of the Daṇḍaka forest is still burning there and does not die out. The fierce and cruel demon Vātāpi was digested by Agastya. Much is heard about the powers of such great brahmins".¹¹⁶

Of course all these accounts of brahmin's wrath, and their claim to supremacy over other *varṇas* due to their supposed power of afflicting curses on people who offended them, are indeed exaggerated braggings of a priestly class which tried to establish its supremacy thereby. What amuses one is, in its enthusiasm to push forward its own cause, the priestly class contradicted their moral integrity which was said to be the basis of their social supremacy. The Epic writer, who seems to be conscious of the perversion of ethics, criticises these claims of the priestly class: "Those, who use their power acquired by penance in destroying others, ruin themselves as well as their ancestors, who do not get heaven".¹¹⁷ Sage Śamika denounces the action of his son Śṛṅgī saying, "A person should not be cursed. A brahmin's attribute is *ksamā*".¹¹⁸ Yet this is a far cry in the wilderness of Epic realities and aspirations.

Elsewhere the Epic teaches a proper equilibrium between the qualities of *ksamā* and anger. King Bali asked his father Prahlāda, "O father, what is best, *ksamā* or a fiery temper?" Prahlāda said, "O son, neither a fiery temper nor the quality of forbearance is always good." Then he describes the faults incurred by excessive

¹¹³ Mbh., XIII, 159 ff.; also cf. XIII, 52 (Bom. Ed.); V, 15-16.

¹¹⁴ Mbh., I, 78.

¹¹⁵ Mbh., XIII, 159, 33 (Bom. Ed.)

¹¹⁶ Mbh., III, 197, 24-27.

¹¹⁷ Mbh., I, 170, 19-21.

¹¹⁸ Mbh., I, 37, 27.

indulgence in both. A person who is too much forgiving is not respected by anybody—not even his wife, who readily goes astray due to the lack of proper check on her, while a person who indulges in too much of anger invites agony, hatred, loss of wealth, and indifference from other people and enemies.” So Prahlāda advises to strike a proper balance between the two. Then he enumerates those circumstances in which a forgiving attitude should be adopted. “A person who has obliged you formerly should be forgiven in spite of a great offence on his part; and so must be a foolish person, who commits an offence because all are not learned enough to understand what they are doing. But those persons, who knowingly commit a crime and then try to minimise it by declaring that they had done it in ignorance, should be killed even for the most minor offence. Again, a person who repeatedly commits a crime should be killed. The learned declare that crime forgivable, which is done unknowingly, after a due investigation of the circumstances in which it was committed. A person can destroy both a person of a fierce as well as a tender temperament, but that should be used only after a due consideration of one’s strength, time and place because, without a proper consideration of these factors, no aim is achieved. Sometimes criminals should be forgiven in consideration of people’s opinion also. These are the circumstances in which a person should be forgiven.”¹¹⁹ The advice is meant for kings, who had to look after the law and order and this concession of using anger is granted with a view to the proper performance of duty.

Apart from royalty, ordinary *ksatriyas* also were expected to show a fiery temper. This follows from Draupadī’s advice to Yudhiṣṭhira. “There cannot be a *ksatriya*, who is devoid of anger, the *ksatriya*, who does not show his wrath (*tejas*) at the proper time, is vanquished by all the creatures . . . While a *ksatriya*, who cannot forgive at a proper time, also becomes unpopular”. The general impression upon the reader however is, that the Epic obviously sides the views of Draupadī and Bhīmasena advocating the propriety of anger as against Yudhiṣṭhira’s idealistic insistence upon *ksamā*.

Jealousy: Jealousy is also run down by the didactic portion of the Epic. Amongst the virtues to be developed by a person *ansūyatā*—not envying anybody—takes a principal place. The

¹¹⁹ Mbh., III, 29, 6; also cf. XII, 56, 39 ff.

Epics regard it as a human weakness and declares it as a universal vice. Those who have nothing are jealous of those who possess something.¹²⁰ Many catastrophies like the banishment of Rāma for fourteen years are the result of such jealousy. Especially in a polygamous society the jealousy of the co-wives is common. Instances of rivalry of co-wives are to be seen between Śarmiṣṭhā and Devayāni,¹²¹ which led to the infliction of a curse on Yayāti; Kuntī who refuses to teach *mantras* to Madri¹²²—lest she may produce more sons than she has, the enmity between Kadru and Vinatā¹²³ which led to the destruction of the whole *sarpa* tribe in the form of *sarpasatra*, and even of the bird co-wives Jaritā and Lapitā.¹²⁴ And hence the Epic writer advises women, "In the world beyond the woman's interest is hurt by keeping relations with a person other than her husband, while jealousy of a co-wife hurts them in this world." Further, it is said "This (jealousy) produces in the mind of both (husband and wife) a desire to take revenge and tortures them. Even Arundhatī who was otherwise of pure vows and famous in this world, was suspicious about Vasiṣṭha who was devoted to her and remained indifferent to him. Hence amongst the bunch of stars called *saptarṣi*, she looks as if hidden, trying to spy over her husband's movements".¹²⁵ The women of royal circles which were famous for their polygamous tendencies, seem to maintain a special sulking room (*krodhāgāra*) to express their anger that ensue from this feeling of jealousy. This is evident from the case of Kaikeyī who prompted by her maid created a scene, to achieve her purpose of installing her own son on the throne and retired to the special room reserved for sulking, in a dress expressing anger.¹²⁶

Not only women but even males were a victim of this feeling. A brahmin who could overcome jealousy in regard to his wife was considered great. Sage Sudarśana could conquer death because he bore no jealousy towards the guest who asked for his wife.¹²⁷

¹²⁰ Mbh., XII, 112, 58-59.

¹²¹ Mbh., I, 70 ff.

¹²² Mbh., I, 115, 22-24.

¹²³ Mbh., I, 18.

¹²⁴ Mbh., I, 224, 10-11, 25.

¹²⁵ Mbh., I, 224, 26-29.

¹²⁶ Rāmāyaṇa, II, 9-10.

¹²⁷ Mbh., XIII, 2; XIII, 104, 130 (Bom. Ed.)

This is corroborated by the reflections of Gautama when he repents the orders he has given to his son for killing his wife. "The sages declare that it is due to jealousy that all miseries arise and it is due to this jealousy that I am sunk in the sea of misery".¹²⁸

Speech : Evil speech and censure was the verbal manifestations of the spirit of violence and hence the epic emphasises the fact that one must control speech at all times. Speech should not be harsh or cruel but it should be essentially sweet and pleasing. In a dialogue between Indra and Br̥haspati¹²⁹ the advantages gained by sweet speech are mentioned. "A person attains great fame thereby. He becomes a great favourite of people. . . On the contrary, a person, who sits without speaking a single word and is always cross, becomes the target of the anger of all creatures. Just as vegetables prepared without spices are not relished by anybody, so do gifts unaccompanied by sweet speech are not admired by anybody. While a person, who takes away everything with a pleasant tongue captivates everybody, so a king who rules people, should as far as possible follow this principle of sweet speech. Thereby he reaps the best of the fruits, and people under him also are not displeased. There is no other action in this world which can equal the merit of a person who always speaks a sweet and attractive tongue." Elsewhere, sweet speech and an apparent absence of anger are openly advocated as useful for ensnaring a powerful enemy to captivity.¹³⁰ The real principle of non-violence is perhaps echoed by a single verse in the Śāntiparva which recommends: "One must speak truth, should not censure anybody and should not be curt."¹³¹ Gītā enumerates control of speech as a *sāttvika tapas*.¹³²

The *smṛti* writers make *vākpārusya*—evil speech—a social crime instead of a vice.¹³³ Br̥haspati divides *vākpārusya* into three categories; the lowest (i.e. when the country, caste or family of a person is abused, or sinfulness is ascribed without specifying any act), *madhyama* (declaring that the abuser will have sexual inter-

¹²⁸ Mbh., XII, 266, 51.

¹²⁹ Mbh., XII, 85, 3-11; cf. Manu II, 159, 63; IV, 184-185; VI, 47-48.

¹³⁰ Mbh., XII, 104, 7-10; I, 82, 11-13; XII, 216, 10-12; XIII, 215, 10-12

(Bom. Ed.)

¹³¹ Mbh., XII, 208, 9-11.

¹³² Gītā, XVII, 15.

¹³³ S. B. E. Vol. 33, p. 355, V, 2-4.

course with the mother or sister of the abused or ascribing the commission of minor sins to the abused), and gravest (charging him with taking forbidden food or drink or mercilessly exposing or ascribing the grave sins to a person).¹³⁴ Manu prescribes fine in degrees according to *varṇa* for slander in public and establishes a regular system to decide the degrees of such crimes.¹³⁵

One should not praise one's own self because it leads one to pride. Nārada in a discourse to sage Gālava points out the pitfalls of self-praise. "Those persons who are themselves full of vices, censure other people by pointing out blemishes in them. Such persons advise others, but consider themselves to be superior to other great persons as they have lost all their judgement because of pride. But a person who neither finds faults with anybody nor praises his own self attains the highest reality by acquiring all the virtues."¹³⁶ He further illustrates his speech by the instances of the flowers and the sun who, never advertise themselves, but are well-known for their service—thus emphasising the fact that a quality need not be proclaimed. It shines out by itself. Emphasis is here on modesty as opposed to pride. Pride accentuates ego, so absence of pride (*nirabhimānatā*) is an essential quality of good moral conduct. The story of sage Maṇanaka, who became proud of his asceticism tries to illustrate this point.¹³⁷ Other instances of proud ascetics humiliated by ordinary people are those of sage Jājali¹³⁸ who became proud of his quality of non-violence in rearing two birds in his matted hair and the brahmin Kauśika,¹³⁹ who was proud of his purity as a brahmin. Kings Yayāti and Bali fell from their high position due to the pride that they had for the good actions they performed.¹⁴⁰ The instance of Yayāti indicates that pride is already raised to the category of a sin which leads to destruction of religious merit and ultimate ruin of a person. This is also suggested by the beautiful fable of the reeds that do not get washed away in the powerful flow of the Ganges because they

¹³⁴ P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmśāstras*, p. 511.

¹³⁵ Manu, VIII, 267-277.

¹³⁶ Mbh., XII, 276, 25-27.

¹³⁷ Mbh., III, 83, 16 ff.

¹³⁸ Mbh., XII, 253, 38-44.

¹³⁹ Mbh., III, 197.

¹⁴⁰ Mbh., I, 83; cf. XII, 91, 24 ff. and Rāmāyaṇa I, xxxi p. 43 trans. Griffith; Manu, VII, 39-42.

know how to bend in modesty unlike the big trees too proud to bend.¹⁴¹

Dama : The licentious behaviour of the Epic characters on the one hand, and the ethical preachings of the didactic portions on the other, necessitated the stress laid upon *dama*—the quality of self-control. It is declared as the only *dharmā*. It constitutes *daivī sampad*. It is said in the Epics : “Control of senses (*dama*) is the only welfare of an individual and more so of a brahmin . . . *Dama* enhances refulgence, and purity and it is due to *dama* that a person becomes completely sinless and attains *Brahman*. There is no *dharmā* higher than *dama* in this world, so have we heard, because all religious (*dhārmika*) people appreciate *dama*. A person acquires great religious merit by controlling the senses and becomes happy in this world as well as the other . . . The learned say, control of senses is the best vow for all the four *āśramas*. That person is fully controlled, in whom are visible the qualities of forbearance, patience, impartiality, truth, simplicity, victory over senses, cleverness, modesty, shyness (*lajjā*), seriousness, benevolence, peace, contentment, sweet speech, mercy on creatures and lack of jealousy. O King of the Kuru family, a person who is controlled worships the elders, is merciful and renounces vices like slander, discontent, false speech, false praise, desire, anger, pride, unmannerliness, self-praise, jealousy and insult. Again that person is above censure who is unattached to any sort of pleasure, who does not envy anybody and who never flows like a sea.”¹⁴²

Here it can be seen that instead of remaining altogether indifferent to the society, a person who has controlled the senses, has to develop qualities of positive behaviour. Such a person, in spite of the detachment he has developed towards society, has to perform his duty, to set an example of perfect behaviour to other people. Bhīṣma also emphasises the same point when he says, “O Bhārata, why should a person who possesses the qualities necessary for *dama* and has a perfect control over the senses, go to forest? What would a person, who does not possess *dama* and has not conquered the senses, would achieve? The place where a *dānta* (a restrained individual) resides is itself like a forest or a hermitage.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Mbh., XII, 113 ff.

¹⁴² Mbh., XII, 154, 6 ff.; cf. XII, 156, 12.

¹⁴³ Mbh., XII, 154, 34; Gitā II, 55.

Elsewhere in the Mahābhārata *dama* is described to be of eighteen types consisting in the avoidance of eighteen vices. They are described as follows, "Faithlessness in action to be performed and not to be performed, falsehood, to find fault with good people, passion, greediness for money, desire (for worldly objects), anger, despair, *īrṣṇā*, avarice (*lobha*), complaining nature (*paīśunya*), jealousy (*matsara*), violence, melancholia, sluggishness in doing good actions, forgetfulness of one's duty, censure of other people, self praise or over-confidence. A person who is free from all these vices is called controlled (*dānta*)".¹⁴⁴ Instead of describing positive moral virtues that a person had to cultivate to be self controlled, avoidance of vices or negative virtues are emphasised.

This quality of restraint over senses, was of course, difficult to achieve. Arjuna puts forward his difficulty before Kṛṣṇa, saying, "Fickle is the mind and to restrain it is as difficult as to curb the wind."¹⁴⁵ Kṛṣṇa suggests light type of yogic practices as a remedy for this. The rigorous ascetic practices are clearly disapproved. This is obvious from the instances of Jājāli and the brahmin Kauśika, whose yogic powers are subdued by the merits of those, like Dharmavyādha and Tulādhara who have a high moral character and perform their *svadharma* for the benefit of people.

To conclude a close examination of the ethical concepts as presented by the Epics, show a wide gap between the didactic idealism and the actual practice of people. This is reflected in the compromise made between the ideal and the practice. The ideal is often made practicable at the cost of its intrinsic value. *Nīti* (polity) always takes precedence over pure ethics and hence the evaluation of ethical concepts is made in terms of the benefit that arises out of it, either for an individual or for the society. The action, whether ethical or unethical is often justified, if its effect is good.

¹⁴⁴ Mbh., V, 43, 23-25.

¹⁴⁵ Gītā, VI, 34; 10-15.

CHAPTER XII

ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT (3)

The ethical development as traced in the Epics, was also effected by the new religious trends that were gradually introduced as a part of Hinduism. These trends culminated in the practical aspect of *dharma*, as differentiated from its subtle ethical principles. They were mainly the practice of fasting, giving gifts (*dāna*) and visiting places of pilgrimage (*tīrthayātrā*); introduced not only as acts fetching religious merit and yielding heaven after death, but sometimes as acts, the merit accrued by performing which surpassed even that accrued by sacrificial acts.

These practices were mainly introduced to simplify the otherwise complicated sacrificial routine. Ordinary people had no means to satisfy their urge to achieve religious merit. Ethically it was satisfied by the teaching of Gītā, which declared the performance of *svadharma* in all stations of life as the best *dharma* leading to heaven. On the religious plane, it was satisfied by these new practices.

Originally introduced as alternative practices and as such subordinated to sacrificial cult, their simplicity made them immensely popular and they superseded even the divine sacrificial cult. The Epics usually trace the origin of these practices to some sage of mythical antiquity. They propagated these religious traditions for the benefit of ordinary people, who could not take advantage of the more complicated practices, as advocated by the brahmins, because of lack of funds.

Fasting : The Epics and the *purāṇas* give much importance to fasting, as the simplest of the ascetic practices leading to the control of one of the senses. In the *Anuśāsanaparva* (Ch. 107) Bhīṣma narrates to Yudhiṣṭhira, how the sage Angiras preached in days of yore, the ritual of fasting as an equal of the sacrificial ritual. Then he proceeds to describe the various types of fasts and merits obtained thereby.

It would be tedious to translate the whole chapter which is clearly a very late interpolation, but the following facts are clear

from it. Firstly, that fasting did not always mean absolute abstinence of food. It may mean abstinence from a certain type of food for a particular time or of certain food on a particular day, at a particular time. Secondly, the merit obtained by fasting consisted of the various types of heavens and the material pleasures offered there.

Thus it is declared "that a person who eats only once every five days, offers oblations in the sacrificial fire, is void of greed, speaks truth, worships the brahmins, observes non-violence, is not jealous and does not commit any sin, obtains the fruit of performing the *dvādaśaha* sacrifice. Moreover that person ascends a palatial building, refulgent like gold and the sun, with a banner of swan and stays there for fifty one *padma* years.¹ Here along with fasting, ethical qualities also are considered essential for obtaining the religious merit of the sacrifice, as well as the particular heavenly mansion described above.

Various moral qualities are also declared to be the consequence of the observance of fast. Thus it is declared that, "a person who for three years takes his meals only once and cohabits only with his wife, becomes truthful, generous, attached to the brahmins, broad-minded (not jealous), tolerant, with controlled senses, and absolutely void of anger."²

Fasting as an ascetic practice, fetching religious merit, is allowed to the two lower varnas, viz., *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* only to certain extent. Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhiṣma, "O Grand-father, please tell me whether the vows (*vratas*) and fasts are meant for all the *varṇas* . . ." Bhiṣma's reply is both, confusing and amusing. He says, "The writers of *śāstras* have declared that brahmins and *ksatriyas* should observe fasts for three nights. Some *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* fast for two or three nights, but they do not obtain any merit out of it, because a *vaiśya* and a *śūdra* should fast only for two nights, so say the *śāstras*. No person, who is conversant with *dharma* has prescribed fasting for three days for the *vaiśyas* and the *śūdras*."³

It seems that with the popularity of fasting as an ascetic or religious practice, the length of the period of fast must have increased. A fast lasting for a very long duration is given the special

¹ Mbh., XIII, 107, 22-26 (Bom. Ed.)

² Mbh., XIII, 107, 9-11 (Bom. Ed.)

³ Mbh., XIII, 106, 11-13 (Bom. Ed.)

name of *anaśana*. The Mahābhārata declares, "A person who dies while performing the *anaśana* is freed from all sins, attains all desires, and obtains all the merits."⁴

This practice, though sanctioned by the *smṛti* and though undertaken in rare extreme cases, must have been opposed by the intellectuals, who emphasised higher ethical principles as a source of eternal happiness and not bodily mortifications. The Gītā declares: "O Arjuna, neither a person who eats too much nor one, who eats nothing; neither a person who sleeps too much nor one who does not sleep at all, is fit to be a *yogī*, but a person who is balanced in diet, action and sleep attains that *yoga* which destroys his unhappiness."⁵ Emphasis on mere mechanical and formal method of fasting is discredited as against the moderate practices of attaining control over senses. The Dhammapada also registers its objection against the brahmanic practice of excessive fasting.⁶

In spite of these protests, the practice of fasting has been very popular and has survived even to these days amongst the Hindus. Certain days like the eleventh day of every *pakṣa* in the Hindu month are considered specially earmarked for the purpose of fasting. The practice of fasting is especially popular with the Jains, who are famous for their strict fasts as compared to the Hindus. Fasts of long durations are also still undertaken by the Jains as a sort of ascetic practice (*tapas*) to obtain merit.

Fasting is also described as a purificatory rite, in the various expiations by the Epics as well as the *smṛtis*. The duration of the fasting period varied according to the gravity of the sin to be expiated. Thus, an expiation called *kṛcchracāndrāyana*, prescribed for adultery with another's wife, consisted of eating as many morsels as the date of the Hindu month. The morsels increased in the bright half and decreased in the dark half, till on the no moon day, one was to go without food.

Tīrthayātrā. Pilgrimage in India is a later phenomenon. It is not referred to, in the Ṛgveda or the *brāhmaṇas*, even when particular sanctity is attached to rivers like Saraswati.⁷ Even Manu (VIII, 92) regards visits to the Ganges or Kurukṣetra as

⁴ Mbh., XIII, 106, 61 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

⁵ Gītā, VI, 16-17.

⁶ Sacred Books of the East, vol. X, 21.

⁷ A. Barth, Religions of India, p. 62.

comparatively unimportant. Gautama, however declares that, "All mountains, all rivers, holy lakes, places of pilgrimage, the dwelling of *ṛsis*, cowpens and the temples of the gods are places which destroy sin."⁸

The origin of the practice of visiting places of pilgrimage may be the outcome of absorption of local cults in brahmanic religion.⁹ Tirthayātrāparva of the Vanaparva of the Mahābhārata, in which the various *tirthas* and their importance along with the religious merit attached to them are described, seems to be a later interpolation. This is a clear indication of the view that pilgrimage as a religious duty must have been recognised some time after the Christian era. The frequent descriptions of the various *tirthas*, and the frequency with which the personalities in the Epics are made to visit them, clearly suggest that by the time of the final edition of the Epic, *tirthayātrā* must have been a very popular practice.

The practice of pilgrimage as a religious creed, is introduced in the Epic, by Sage Pulastya¹⁰, as a secret practice, which only the great sages know and which fetches even greater religious merit than the performance of big sacrifices. In introducing this religious creed, Pulastya makes it clear that the practice of pilgrimage was for those people, who could not afford to perform the various sacrificial rites.

In the subsequent verses and chapters, at first Pulastya and then Dhaumya describe the various *tirthas* or holy places to the Pāṇḍava king Yudhiṣṭhira, who felt bitter about Arjuna's departure and wanted to go away somewhere else to forget him. The description of one *tirtha* after the other is made more or less on geographical lines.¹¹ But it can be noted, that almost all the places are either of legendary or of historical importance and perhaps it is for this reason, that it is considered a place worth visiting. Again, a simple visit to these places is not enough. A person should perform some religious act fetching merit at that particular place. These acts mostly consisted in giving gifts, or taking a bath, or fasting, or even the performance of *yajna*. Sometimes a particular confluence of the various *naksatras* is considered very important

⁸ Gautama, XIV, 14.

⁹ Encyclopedia of Religion & Ethics, Vol. X, p. 24.

¹⁰ Mbh., III, 82 (Bom. Ed.)

¹¹ R. K. Mookerji, Fundamental Unity of India, p. 63.

and sacred for a visit to a particular holy place of pilgrimage.

Specific *tīrthas* like Puṣkara, the river Gaṅgā and the Kurukṣetra are considered specially holy and simply a desire to visit these places destroys the sins of a person.¹² Thus, it is declared: "All *tīrthas* are equally important in the *satya*yuga. In the *trētā*, Puṣkara is considered more important; in the *dvāpara* Kurukṣetra is considered meritorious and in the *kali* age the Ganges. One should perform *tapas* in Puṣkara; give gifts on Mahālaya; should enter fire in Malaya *tīrtha* and should embrace death on the Bhṛgutuṅga mountain."¹³

The religious merit acquired by the visit to these various holy places of pilgrimage and the performance of the various meritorious acts, also differed according to the importance attached to the place and the action performed therein. Thus, if a bath would obtain heaven in one place, at another place it would fetch a celestial plane, or a company of *apsarās* or simply a merit equal to the performance of *aśvamedha*. Again, if it was specially meritorious to take a bath in one place, in the other fasting would be more important and oblations to ancestors in the third.

Along with the sanctity attached to the visits of these holy places, an equal importance is attached to the ethical standard achieved by the person who visits them. Thus, in the beginning of his discourse about the secret doctrine of the pilgrimage, Pulastya makes it very clear that a visit to a sacred place is of any value, only if a person is pure in heart and full of faith. In a discussion about the merit obtained through a visit to these places, he declares: "Only that person can enjoy the merit acquired through a visit to the sacred place whose hands, feet, mind, knowledge, *tapas* and fame, all these are well controlled. One who does not ask, but accepts only that, which is given to him, obtains the religious merit by visiting various places of pilgrimage. Again, one who avoids hypocrisy, is non-indulgent in worldly affairs while on a pilgrimage, eats less and is of controlled senses, acquires the religious merit of visiting a *tīrtha*. Again, O king, one who entertains no anger, who is always truthful and who is tolerant towards all the creatures, obtains the fruits of pilgrimage."¹⁴

¹² Mbh., III, 82, 32.

¹³ Mbh., III, 85, 90-91.

¹⁴ Mbh., III, 82, 9-11 (Bom. Ed.)

Perhaps, to increase the popularity of the new religious trend of *tīrthayātrā*, in some passages, ethics is sacrificed to religion; and a dip in a particular river, or death on a particular mountain is supposed to destroy all the sins of a person, leading him to heaven. The Epic declares: "Even if a person has committed hundreds of sins, by taking a bath in the water of Gaṅgā, all these sins are destroyed like a log of wood, being destroyed in the fire."¹⁵ This belief has such a stronghold on popular mind that even to this day pilgrims flock to holy places of pilgrimage to wash their sins and in periodical festivals like the *Kumbha* festival, there are big stampedes in which hundreds of people are killed.

Gifts : Right from the earliest epochs of the Indian cultural traditions giving of gifts was considered a very noble aspect of human character and one of the various duties that the individual had to perform. The *R̥gveda* praises the persons who give gifts generously, and besides the other hymns, the hymns written in praise of the benevolent persons who give gifts (*dāna stutis*), form a very important part of the collection. These vedic gifts consisted not only of food, cows and other valuable articles, but also included public amenities like wells, rest-houses and gardens.

Kane¹⁶ who quotes Aparārka, differentiates between two types of *dāna* called *iṣṭa* and *pūrta*. Aparārka on the authority of the *Mahābhārata* defines both as : "Whatever is offered in the single fire and what is offered in the three *śrauta* fires and the gifts made inside the *vedi* are called *iṣṭa*, while dedication of deep wells, oblong large wells and tanks, temples, distribution of food and maintaining public gardens; these are called *pūrta*." Since Aparārka bases his definition on the *Mahābhārata* itself, it is very probable that the Epic not only carried on the earlier tradition of giving gifts as a part of *dharma* but it systematised the whole process like other religious processes, and a differentiation had already arisen between the various types of gifts. Secondly, while *iṣṭa* led to heaven, *pūrta* to *moksa* or emancipation. Charity was thus placed on a higher footing than religious ceremonies and sacrifices.

The place of gift-giving as upheld by the society is unique in the individual behaviour. The sixfold duties traditionally pres-

¹⁵ Mbh., III, 88, 89 (Bom. Ed.)

¹⁶ P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstras*, Vol. II, p. 844.

cribed for a brahmin, include giving of gifts (*dāna*) as well as their acceptance (*pratigrahaṇa*). And as for the other *varṇas* it was their incumbent duty to satisfy a brahmin by bestowing upon him whatever was asked. Śāntiparva¹⁷ for instance declares that it was a duty of a brahmin to accept whatever was given to him as a gift and oblige the donor thereby. It also emphasises that a brahmin should not misuse this privilege. "It is the *dharma* for brahmins, . . . neither to accept gifts without reason nor to give gifts wrongly. If by chance a brahmin acquires much wealth from a host, a student or from a girl; he should perform sacrifices and use it in giving gifts, but should not enjoy it alone. A brahmin staying in the *gṛhastha* stage of life should accept gifts only for the sake of gods, *ṛsis*, manes, old people, needy people and hungry people." At another place in Śāntiparva¹⁸ *dānadharma* is declared to be one of the characteristics of gentlemanly behaviour or *ācāra* along with *satya* and *ahimsā*. It is considered to be a duty of a wealthy person, to share some part of his property with those, who have not got anything because it is after all for the welfare of people, that destiny has provided him with trade, business etc. which helps him to earn money. So a person should practice *dama*, *dāna*, *dayā*, etc. in such a way that his merit would compel even gods to come to him. *Dāna* is also ranked with actions fetching religious merit. The Epic declares that what is given in this world as a gift, is received in the other world by way of merit.¹⁹ It is in view of the same philosophy, that Parāśara declares: "Who obliges whom in this world and who gives whom? It is for one's ownself that all the creatures perform different types of *karmas* . . . One receives the same merit by accepting a gift from a worthy person as by giving one. Yet a twice born person acquires more merit by giving a gift."²⁰

There must have been an undercurrent of thought, especially in the non-brahmanic circles, according to which acceptance of gifts must have been considered humiliating. A *ksatriya* always refuses to use anything but that, which is earned by the strength of his arms. While he rejoices in giving gifts, acceptance is a

¹⁷ Mbh., XII, 234, 8 ff.; cf. 251, 17ff.

¹⁸ Mbh., XII, 297, 12-14.

¹⁹ Mbh., XIII, 58, 32 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁰ Mbh., XII, 281, 1-3.

shame to his haughty pride.²¹ But soon the brahmins overcame the scornful attitude of the *ksatriyas* by establishing *pratigrahaṇa* (acceptance of gifts) as a special favour to the society on their part. *Anuśāsanaparva* reads, "...The taker wins the same merit as the giver, for nothing rolls on one wheel." It is also emphasised that gifts should be given only to a brahmin. The Epic declares, "Brahmins elevate others and their own selves by the power of their religious actions, recitation, sacrifice, study etc. So gods are pleased with a person who satisfies the brahmins; and by the power of their benediction, that person goes to heaven. O Yudhiṣṭhira, without doubt, you will attain the undestructible heaven by worshipping the gods, the manes and the brahmins"²². A person who is on the death-bed should worship a brahmin, if he desires to go to heaven. Especially in a *śrāddha* only a brahmin of uncensurable character should be invited; but in the absence of worthy brahmins, those brahmins who are otherwise not fit to be invited may also be satisfied with dinner.²³ As a process of rationalisation it is made an incumbent duty of the *ksatriyas* to give gifts, because *ksatriyas* always performed violent actions, that should be expiated;²⁴ and it was in accordance with this rule that in times of yore Paraśurāma, though himself a brahmin bestowed the whole earth on Kaśyapa.²⁵ Yudhiṣṭhira himself offers his whole kingdom to Vyāsa after the performance of the *aśvamedha yajña* at the end of the Mahābhārata war.²⁶ Daśaratha and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are also found bestowing lavish gifts upon brahmins.²⁷ Thus the fact that various *ksatriya* kings did not fall short of this ideal, is obvious from the illustrations of the various kings, who bestow not only jewels and cows, but even their daughters and wives to the brahmin sages, and go to the extent of sacrificing their own lives for the sake of a brahmin.²⁸ Yayāti declares, "To him that asks, must be

²¹ Cf. The sentiments expressed in Mbh., I, 73, 9-11; III, 196, 12; 200, 45 ff. (Bom. Ed.) quoted fully elsewhere.

²² Mbh., III, 200, 3-12.

²³ Mbh., III, 200, 13-19 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁴ Mbh., XIII, 61, 4 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁵ Mbh., XIII, 62, 34-38 (Bom. Ed.)

²⁶ Mbh., XII, 25, 7-10.

²⁷ Mbh., II, 30; XII, 40, 18-20; 45, 5; Rāmāyaṇa Bālakāṇḍa, 72.

²⁸ Mbh., XII, 234; XII, 226, 14 (Bom. Ed.); XIII, 32 (Bom. Ed.); XIII, 58, 32 (Bom. Ed.); XV, 2 (Bom. Ed.).

given, this rule of life I have taken for mine. And thou art asking me for fulfilment of a wish, speak what I can do for you."²⁹ Kārṇa echoes exactly the same sentiment, when he says to god Sun, who had come to plead with him not to part his divine earrings and golden armours, out of affection for him, and give them to Indra, who was to come there in disguise as a brahmin, to ask for them for Arjuna's sake. He declares: "O god Sun, I bestow even my life for the best among brahmins."³⁰

Of course the Epic tries to justify the case of the brahmins by giving long lists of the qualities they should possess to be worthy of this privilege. These lists³¹ mostly emphasise ethical integrity, education, social prestige, occupation and lack of physical defects in a brahmin. Only that brahmin who satisfies all these tests is considered worthy of accepting gifts. But the ideal is not maintained in practice. As for instance Śāntiparva narrates the story of a brahmin Gautama, who is fallen as a brahmin by following the occupation of a hunter as well as by marrying a widow *dasyu* woman. In spite of the fact that Gautama does not satisfy the standard set for a brahmin, a giant—Virupākṣa—bestows gifts on him knowingly to obtain merit.³² Kārṇa also bestows his armour and earrings to Indra because the latter came disguised as a brahmin and as a *ksatriya* he would not refuse a brahmin. This fact is verified with reference to Manu also, who advises a king to give gifts to brahmins saying, "The offering made through the mouth of a brahmin neither spills nor falls nor perishes. It is far more excellent than *agnihotras*. A gift to one, who is not a brahmin, yields ordinary reward; to one who calls himself a brahmin, a double reward; to a well-read brahmin a hundred thousand fold; and to one who knows the *vedas* and *angas*, an endless reward."³³

The obvious greed of a brahmin for gifts must have led to maxims such as "A *ksatriya*'s patience is tested in case of warfare for pro-

²⁹ Mbh., III, 195, 4; I, 88, 19.

³⁰ Mbh., III, 302, 25.

³¹ Mbh., III, 200, 61-70; 313, 80 ff. (Bom. Ed.) XII, 36, 34-39; 310, 12-16; 37, 27, 32; 40, 17; 297, 12 ff.; 226, 14 ff.; 34-43; 180, 2-4 (Bom. Ed.) XIII, 22-9-21; 60, 22-24; 121, 2; 23, 11 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

³² Mbh., XII, 165, 6-10.

³³ Mbh., VII, 82-85.

tection, that of a brahmin in begging for alms.”³⁴

The Epic attempts to check the obvious greed of the brahmins as reflected by Gautama, referred to above and the brahmin Trijata as described in the Rāmāyaṇa.³⁵ Thus a story³⁶ is told about Saptarṣis who refused to accept gifts from a king, due to the fear of losing their ascetic merits, even though they were starving. “The merit of a brahmin, acquired by penance is destroyed, like a forest on fire, by acceptance of gifts. So O king, you and your gifts may be spared for the others. One who wants to achieve satisfaction in this birth as well as the next should avoid acceptance of gifts. The ascetic merit of a brahmin is preserved by restraining his desire for acceptance of gifts. Restraint is his wealth, while the merit of a greedy brahmin is destroyed.” As a result of their contentedness Indra leads them to heaven saying, “You have acquired the indestructible heaven in which all desires are satisfied by conquering your greed. So, O brahmins, get up from here and enter heaven.”

The Epic describes the various types of gifts, ranging from a morsel of cooked food to the extent of this earth, encircled by the seas. Anuśāsanaparva³⁷ after describing “*abhaya*” (complete non-violence) to other creatures as the best gift, comes to more material things and devotes chapters after chapters describing the greatness of the different gifts and the merits acquired thereby.³⁸

Rules are also laid down regarding the various times and places for giving gifts. Gifts given in particular *nakṣatras*, on particular days like the eleventh day or the full moon day, or in particular places like a river bank or a sacred place of pilgrimage and on particular occasions like *śrāddha* or *yajna* fetched more merit than ordinary gifts.³⁹

The works of public welfare technically called ‘*pūrta*’, are also not neglected. A king is specially advised to build wells, tanks, etc. in big cities and to plant trees that would give shade.⁴⁰ At another

³⁴ Mbh., XIII, 60, 3 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁵ Rāmāyaṇa, Trans. Griffiths, XXXIII, p. 133.

³⁶ Mbh., XII, 165, 28.

³⁷ Mbh., XIII, 59, 5 (Bom. Ed.)

³⁸ Mbh., XIII, 62; 63; 65; 66; 67; 69; 71-75; 79-80, 84-85 (Bom. Ed.)
XIV, 6; 7; 8; 10; 11; 14. (Bom. Ed.)

³⁹ Mbh., XIII, 61, 64, 75; III, 200, 120 ff. (Bom. Ed.)

⁴⁰ Mbh., XII, 87, 15.

place it is noted, that for the benefit of the souls of departed warriors, king Yudhiṣṭhira built many rest-houses; places, where drinking water was available; and big tanks.⁴¹ Anuśāsanaparva devotes a whole chapter describing the utility of such gifts and the merit acquired thereby. Such works are declared to fetch the same religious merit as obtained by the performance of *aśvamedha* sacrifice.⁴²

It is also laid down that the donor obtains the merit of giving gifts, only if he gives his gifts with an open heart and without malice. Vyāsa in a discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira explains this fact clearly. While giving gifts, it should be remembered, that only that wealth, obtained by straight means should be given to a worthy person, at proper time and proper place, because the gift of wealth obtained by injustice does not relieve the donor of his sins. But, O Yudhiṣṭhira, only a small amount of *dāna*, if given at proper time, to a worthy person with pure mind, yields fruit amounting to merit—tremendous in proportion to the actual gift, as is declared by the *śāstras*. Vyāsa illustrates his statement by a story about a brahmin Mudgala, who maintained himself by collecting grain in the fields. Durvāsā the short-tempered ascetic came to him six times, and ate away all that he had collected, but the hungry brahmin happily gave away the food collected by him, and he and his family remained without food. Ultimately Durvāsā was pleased with that brahmin and blessed him with heaven. He declared that brahmin to be the best donor, because in spite of the pangs of hunger, he could keep himself controlled and gave away what little he had earned, by his own labour, without any malice to the person who begged for it.⁴³ A similar instance is narrated in Āśvamedhikaparva of the Mahābhārata where Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrifice is considered nothing compared to the porridge given by a brahmin to a sage with perfect faith.⁴⁴

The Gītā also emphasises this point of view when it describes the three types of gifts saying : "That *dāna* is *sāttvika* which is given with a desire to give, without any feeling of obligation, in proper time and place, to a worthy person. But that gift, which is given

⁴¹ Mbh., XII, 42, 5-7.

⁴² Mbh., XIII, 58 (Bom. Ed.)

⁴³ Mbh., III, 260.

⁴⁴ Mbh., XV, 90 (Bom. Ed.)

with a feeling of obligation, or with an eye upon merit obtained by it, is called *rājas dāna*, while that *dāna* is the lowest which is given without any consideration to time, place and person, and with a bad intention.”⁴⁵

As noted above this ethical aspect of *dānadharma* is lost sight of. Most of the rules laid down for *dānadharma* are observed till this day. Gifts of clothes, cows, bed and other useful articles are always bestowed upon brahmins as a part of the death ceremony with a view, that the departed soul may get these things in the next world. Brahmins are gladly fed. Apart from the brahmins a whole community of professional beggars who maintain themselves upon the charity of people exist in India. Thus, in spite of an obvious emphasis upon ethical concepts of charity, faith and purity of heart; an exaggerated emphasis on the *varṇa* status, and an attempt to popularise these new trends by offering temptations of easy reward in the next birth, led to an undermining of the ethical standards of society and made religion mercenary.

⁴⁵ Gītā, XVII, 20-22.

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